Theoretical Assumption, Technique and Future Development of Dialogical Self Theory (DST) Oriented Therapy

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Abstract: Dialogical Self Theory (DST) was proposed in the 1990s. As a western postmodern self theory, DST conceptualizes the self as a mind society populated with multiple positions, like different individuals in real society, positions are relative autonomous and in dialogical interaction as well. Based on its theoretical assumption, the DST oriented therapy takes psychopathology as dysfunction in the dialogue between positions and psychotherapy as dialogical co-construction of meaning in the process of which therapist plays a special position in client’s mental scenario. The concrete technique of DST oriented therapy can be generalized as three classes: “Personification of I position”, “creating dialogical space”, “application of the deposited I” DST oriented therapy has advantage of flexibility and easy operation. Further studies could be done on its clinical efficacy and the combination with other school of psychotherapy.

Key words: Dialogical self • I position • Self multiplicity • Psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Dialogical Self Theory (DST) is a theory that proposed by Hubert J.M. Hermans in the 1990s. It explains the nature of self, how self is created and how self develops. It is the fruit produced by psychology under the post-modernist trend in the sight of its proposal time and philosophical background and is deeply influenced by narrative psychology [1]. It is a theory that can work as a bridge through which one can explore the self's latitude of the moment and other latitudes and to think about other latitudes of the personality is a natural extension of its theoretical core principles [2]. The aim of this paper is to introduce dialogical self theory and its corresponding techniques as an interesting and useful proposal for psychotherapy practice. The theoretical background and specific techniques will be discussed, as well as current trends in clinical practice. Finally, we aim to demonstrate the practical applications of the presented roles in psychological counseling and to discuss what should be concerned in future practice.

Source of Dialogical Self and Theoretical Background:
The self-essence under the Dialogical Self Theory can be concisely described as that there are multiple dynamic and relatively independent I-positions contained in self, which intertwined with each other like individual thoughts [3, 4]. The two concepts of dialogue and self were combined in DST and the self was considered to be dialogic. The main features of DST can be summed up as: (1) there is an Imaginal (subjective) space intertwined with the physical (objective) space; (2) there are a lot of I positions rooted in the imaginal space; (3) there are dialogical movements among these I positions;(4) during the dialogical process of multiple positions the meaning of one or some positions will be suppressed and the meaning of other positions will be dominant temporarily. Dominance of one meaning means the temporary suppression of the other one [5]. The most distinctive feature of Dialogical Self Theory is that it does not consider self as a single spiritual entity. The self is presented in a spatial structure in which different I positions are rooted [6]. Multiple aspects, voices and narratives represented by multiple positions are in a dialogue relationship, as if the various roles in the story interact with each other and affect each other to jointly promote the development of the story. During the process of the conception of dialogue self, the narrative self, polyphonic novels and James' distinction between I and Me had a great influence on the Dialogical Self Theory, which make it not only the combination of the three above but also an innovation based on them.
From Narrative Self to Dialogical Self: from Sole Self with Time Structure to Multiple Self with Space Structure: The self research of narrative orientation suggests that individuals would construct and develop self when they were narrating their life stories and recalling autobiographical memories [7]. The self of the individual has a close relationship with the life stories he/she narrated, through which the meaning and contents of self can be defined. The focus of narrative-oriented psychotherapy is that how visitors organize their personal stories and how they rebuild their stories over time. The narrative self emphasizes the consistency of self in aspect of time. Narrative psychology not only recognizes the influence of situations but also uses a main line to connect the scattered and seemingly disorderly events in specific situations defined in the theory of social construction. This main line is time and these events can be organized in the chronological order to make a complete and continuous story [8]. The purpose of narrative thinking is to establish a consistent self in the transformation of time and situation. It is precisely because of the intrinsic characteristics of the narrative that the nature of self is not limited to eternal things and things to be shown, but is constantly being rewritten [9].

Narrative psychologists saw that the structure of narrative changed over time. The Dialogical Self Theory holds the view that self narrative is also shaped in space. Individuals always tell a story in a position under the background of space and time. Once the storyteller is identified, other positions will be included in the story. Stories do not just belong to storytellers. They are constructed and reconstructed by multiple voices and positions and the interaction among positions may cause stories to change [10]. The Dialogical Self Theory changes the sole narrative self with time structure into the multiple-positions self with space structure. The narrative self is one storyteller tells one story, but the dialogical self includes multiple storytellers to promote the development of the story jointly.

Polyphonic Novel -- Metaphor Source of Dialogical Self: The concept of polyphonic novel is proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin [11], originating from the dialogue analysis about Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels. Bakhtin thinks that Dostoyevsky's novels represent a unique form of expression of which polyphonic novel can be used as a metaphor: A work is not created by one author but multiple authors. In his novels, besides himself, all the roles are authors and thinkers. Roles does not belong to one another but are independent and mutually authoritative. Just like multiple part music while multiple voices accompany or compete each other by dialogues. Hermans uses polyphonic novels as a metaphor of the dialogue self. There are multiple individuals within the self. Each individual expresses its position and opinions independently, influences and intertwines with each other by telling stories so as to promote the overall development of the self. Inspiration of polyphonic novels on the theory can be attributed to two points: There are many independent parts in the self seeking for expression; the dialogical relationships among these parts promote the overall development of the self.

From I/Me to I/I Position: William James originally divided the self into I and Me. I was the subject of the understanding and Me was the object of recognition. Later, he came up with the concept of extended self and all people or things related to me (my father, my friends) are included in the self. At this time, other is also included as a subordinate role. The Dialogical Self Theory further deepens the meaning of self for other using the concept of position. For the self, other is not just a subordinate to the I-Me relation but also plays an important part in self construction through dialogues. Other is connected to and shape the internal self by occupying the external position and it affects the development of the self through the relation between I and I [12].

The Variety and Functions of the Theoretic Core Concept: Position: Position is the core concept of the Dialogical Self Theory. There are lots of positions stand in Self and each of them has different functions [13]. The basic positions consists of the I position, internal position and external position. As the most basic position, the I position refers to the position that can be offered to position I in the position repertoire. Theoretically, all positions are forms of the I position [14]. The internal position refers to the internal I position such as "positive me", "confident me" and "me as a mother". The external position refers to other in the self and voices of other in the imaginal space. For example, when a visitor wants to hear encouragement from a counselor, the counselor occupies the external position of the visitor's self and offer strength and support to the visitor in the imaginal space. When the visitor gradually internalizes them and no longer relies on the image of specific counselors to provide strength, the visitor has an internal position of "powerful me". Therefore, the internal position is closely connected to the external position [15].
In addition to the main positions, there are some special positions that are proposed during the process of explaining the integration and development of the dialogical self. They are called dynamic elements. The core position is a position that other positions reply on to function and it is often related to important events, objects and life narrations. For example, if "obnoxious me" is one person's core position, other positions will be affected by this position and become passive and self-abased. Meta-position is a special position that the theory emphasizes and it plays an important role in psychotherapy. The perspective of I in this position can overlook other positions and overall structure of the self. For example, when a counselor discovers two positions in a female visitor (two positions that are involved in consultation), the "poor me" makes her feel inferior to other people, especially looks, but the other position helps her to fight against the "poor me". "Poor me" makes her feel inferior and the confrontational position makes her strong and constantly competes and compares with others to prove herself. The confrontational position dominates her and makes her feel hostile, envy and exhausted sometimes. When the counselor asks the visitor to talk about how she feels about the two positions, the visitor enters the meta-position. In this position, the visitor recognize neither of the position ("poor me" or "confrontational position"), but understand the interaction between these two positions. The promoter position is rather important in the self and provides a direction for the development and integration of the self system. Some important others (e.g. teachers) will occupies the position sometimes. The third position is a middle position developed to reconcile conflicts between two confrontational positions. The ambiguous third position refers to the part of the self that has a vague meaning of the other, the object, or the event. It promotes the division of the internal position of the self. For example, a mother sometimes cares for her child and sometimes refuses her child to split the child's self into two positions: "good me" and "bad me" [16].

The Dialogical Self Theory Oriented Psychotherapy Hypothesis and Objectives of Psychotherapy: The Dialogical Self Theory holds that the psychological problems are temporary imbalance of dialogues between the internal and external positions. The essence of psychotherapy is that the counselors and visitors reconstruct meanings through dialogues [17-19]. The psychological integration based on the Dialogical Self Theory is not the integration of multiple positions. The counselors explores different aspects of the visitor's self space, seeks valuable positions for treatment and integrates them into a heterogeneous but harmonious whole under more appropriate dialogue relationships [20].

Psychotherapy and diagnosis based on the Dialogical Self Theory values the situation of position repertoire, especially the followings aspects: First, hierarchy in the position repertoire. To avoid the self breaks inside, there should be higher positions to help the self integration. Second, the accessibility of positions, when new positions are introduced into the position repertoire during a psychotherapy session, the new positions can help the visitors to adapt under certain contexts. Third, flexibility of position change, visitors should be able to change the self's position according to contexts. Forth, affective variety of positions, if the self system's positions lack emotions, it is necessary to find and introduce positions with different emotions [12].

Psychotherapy based on the Dialogical Self Theory finds that individuals with mental disorders such as personality disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and schizophrenia often have the following problems: First, dialogical impoverishment or barren discourse. The inner self lacks necessary positions to deal with different social environments. Only the existing deficit modes can cope with difficulties and the dialogue process is also closed. It is difficult for them to incorporate new positions in the actual dialogues and interaction. Second, Mono-logical narrative and dominant voices, one or some positions are too strong. They dominate the narrative process of the self, causing other positions to be suppressed, unable to enter the dialogue and hindering the self's potential of coping with life challenges. Third, disorganization, dialogical cacaphony and dissociation, without the help from the core or high positions to self integration, there are no hierarchical positions. Which cause self narrative theme to disorder and the self filling with conflicts [21, 22].

Counseling Relationship Based on the Dialogical Self Theory: Views in the past tends to simplify the counseling relationship as intervention, self-growth stimulation, or subconscious exploration. However, these therapies cannot summarize the entire nature of the counseling relationship [23]. The counseling relationship based on the Dialogical Self Theory is different from the traditional views: the counselor is a potential position in the visitor's mental scenario to help or change the visitor's self structure. The counselor should realize that once the relationship is established, he/her occupies a special position in the visitor's self. For the visitor, this position
aims to change the dysfunctional elements in the self. Meanwhile, the visitor enters the counselor's scenario to invoke the counselor's emotional response and dialogue, which may help or hinder the counseling process. In other word, as two complex self systems, the counselor and the visitor enter each other's world and affect each other during dialogues [10].

**Basic Procedure of Dialogical Self Theory Oriented Psychotherapy:** Psychotherapy based on the Dialogical Self Theory often proceed as follows [12]: Identify and accept the positions involved in the visitors' narratives; Clear the difference between these positions; Empathize with their narratives; Pay more attention to the emotional tone of the narratives and visitor's ton when they tells the stories; Promote or introduce new positions to make a response to dominant position in a dysfunctional self; Promote dialogues between these positions and pay attention to their changes in the relatively dominant relationship.

**Specific Techniques and Operation of the Dialogical Self Theory Oriented Psychotherapy:** The forms of psychotherapy based on the Dialogical Self Theory are very diverse. Besides, the techniques of other psychotherapy schools can be explained under the framework of the Dialogical Self Theory [24-27] and methods derived are diverse. They can be divided into three categories.

**Personification of I Position:** Personification of the I position is the most basic and unique technique. The basic principle is to personify the positions appeared during the treatment process, give it a concrete image or personality and directly talk to the personified position and then enter the personified position to respond. There are three forms of the personification technique [28]: One, empty chair work. Personify the necessary position, imagine it sitting on a chair and then talk to it. Two, two chairs work. Personify two confrontational positions in the visitor's self, imagine them sitting on two chairs, encourage the visitor to enter the two positions alternatively and speak on behalf of each position. Three, multiple chairs work. Personify the visitor's multiple positions and then encourage the visitor to speak for each position.

Usage of the I position avoids the confusion brought about by analyzing problems using one personality and one self and explains the contradiction and conflicts of self existence. Personification of positions can help the counselors much more easier to understand their visitors. For example, a depressed visitor is caught in a bad mood brought by self attack, the counselor guides the visitor: "You see the part where you think is not good enough. How does it look like? If it has an image, what would it be? You can name the part and see the image that thinks you are not good enough and keeps criticizing you." The visitor names one part as "incapable child" and another "authoritative father" by personifying positions.

The I position technique is very flexible and is highly compatible with other psychotherapy schools. For example, "irrational belief" can be used as a visualized concrete personality position and visitors can debate with them. You can do the same with empathy phenomenon. For example, a counselor tells a visitor: "The angry feeling you are expressing may be towards another person. Imagine there is an empty chair in front of you. You can express your feelings to this empty chair. Who do you think it would be on this chair?". The position can also be introduced by the visitor's narratives and dreams. It can directly use the visitor's symbolic image in dreams as a position and let the visitor to enter the position to express. In a word, the I position techniques are flexible and diverse and the positions are highly comprehensive, which is different from sub-personalities [29]and ego states [30]. If the I position can be well used in different contexts, it will be highly useful for the counseling process.

**Creating Dialogical Space:** Psychotherapy based on the Dialogical Self Theory emphasizes the importance of dialogues. Dialogues between individuals in real life generate new meanings and dialogues between different positions in the self space change the meaning and narratives of the self. The I position is not considered an existing entity. It is dynamic. Narratives and voices of different positions are continuously shaped and changed during dialogues to reconstruct the self [31].

A self dialogue is created in the dialogical space which provides a boundary zone for distinction between the self and non-self, meanings are continuously constructed and reconstructed in the zone. When a person conducts a self talk, the narrating self and the narrated self are far away from each other, like space and division between subjects [32, 33]. Counselors should help visitors to create dialogical spaces. The meta
position is a critical element during treatment in dialogical spaces and it is highly related to self reflective. Visitors can reflect and convert those unsettling emotions and contradiction by creating a dialogical space for the self.

Patients with personality disorder can hardly create dialogical spaces. They are weak in self reflection and can confuse their own emotions, thoughts and intentions with others'. They have difficulties in mind reading. The defects of meta cognitive function hinder patients with personality disorder to form dialogical spaces and counselors are difficult to play a role in dialogues as a new position. Therefore, the following three steps need to be performed before the intervention based on the dialogical self [18]: Step one, counselors trigger patients to narrate specific autobiographic stories. Step two, promote self reflection and enhance awareness of positions. Step three, improve patients' mind reading ability through counseling relationship. The purpose of these measures is to enable patients to think others as unique individuals to break through their original cognitive modes so that counselors can stimulate the internal dialogue of visitors through external positions and prepare for the formation of a dialogical space.

**Emotional Coaching Based on the Non-Positioning I:**
The I is not always in some position. It can be in a non-positioning status and does not acknowledge any position, which is called transcendental awareness. When a person has a strong emotion, the self can be split from this emotion using a non-evaluation method. This can prevent the self from fixing on one emotion and over acknowledging it and this can also prevent the emotion from stabilizing and fixating to become a position to restrain the vision field of the self.

There are seven steps for the emotional coaching based on awareness [34]: Step one, identify and enters an emotion. Step two, leave this emotion. Step three, identify and enter a counter emotion. Step four, leave this counter emotion. Step five, establish dialogical relationship between the emotion and counter emotion. Step six, integrate these two emotions. Step seven, develop a promoter position. Usually, the first emotion entered is the emotion that bothers visitors. For example, a counselor leads a visitor to enter an anxious emotion and consider the emotion a position split from I. As an observer, I perceive anxiety but not evaluate or try to change or suppress the anxiety. I stay together with the anxiety, but I keep a distance from it. I let the anxious position stay away in the imaginary space. The counselor helps the visitor to find a counter emotion, calmness or happy. I repeat the previous process as well. Step one to step four should be practiced repeatedly until visitors master the method and can enter or leave an emotion freely.

Dialogical relationship between two opposite emotions is established in step five. Visitors enter two different emotions alternatively to speak for them. For example, the anxious position says: ”I am worried that other people will laugh at me if I can't do things well. I feel bad.” Then the calm position says: ”You have your own advantages. Be yourself and try your best. That's enough.” Dialogue between two conflicting positions leads to decentralization within the self. Two positions are integrated in step six. "Integration" refers to a self system where the two positions are viewed at a higher perspective. It is a more intelligent and artistic perspective that transcends the dual judgment of good and bad emotions, represents a complete self that consists of positive and negative emotional positions and transcends the instinctive response to the pursuit of happiness and the elimination of pain. The promoter function of awareness is consolidated and performed in step seven. When a visitor gains this ability, he can positively perceive and integrate the self. Perception is closely connected with being. Being does not rely on what is done and what is gained, instead it embraces everything that happens to change the conditional self value to unconditional self acceptance and existence.

**Dialogical Self Theory Oriented Psychotherapy and its Development Trends:** There are two prominent trends in the psychotherapy field: First, more and more attention has been paid to the power of culture in the development of psychotherapy techniques, such as the popular Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy where mindfulness is derived from Buddhist meditation [35]. Second, there are more and more crossovers and integration in the development of different perspectives and methods of psychotherapy schools. In the process of psychological counseling and therapy, it is no longer one school that masters discourse hegemony. Several methods are mutually integrated and complementary, which shows that there are many same effective factors in psychotherapy techniques [36] and mental problems are explained from multiple perspectives. The focus on cultural factors and integration together constitutes the characteristics of the Dialogical Self Theory based psychotherapy.

In the past two decades, the Dialogical Self Theory has developed rapidly in the multicultural field [37, 38]. It also shows its uniqueness in Eastern cultural thoughts. For example, the most original I position in the Dialogical Self Theory embodies the Buddhist "no-self” thought and the contents of "I" is the result of external recognition.
rather than physical existence. This concept surpasses the previous Western self-psychologist's dichotomy between the subject and the object. Although it does not really exceed the barrier between the subject and the object, it separates the theoretically split subject and object and integrates them under dialogues [1]. It is a deepening of self acknowledge and is also reflected in its emotional coaching techniques. Besides, the Dialogical Self Theory is a bridging theory which is not a grand theory that explains human's complex behaviour or a specific theory that aims at human's some functions [24]. It can communicate different psychotherapy schools and its techniques can be well integrated with genres such as narrative therapy, behavioral cognition therapy, psychoanalytic therapy, object relation theory, self psychology school, gestalt therapy and hyper-personal psychology in order to achieve a deep understanding of psychological problems and flexible control of the psychological treatment process, showing its vitality as a "bridge theory"[39].

CONCLUSIONS

At present, The Dialogical Self Theory based psychotherapy has matured personality theory, psychotherapy assumptions and corresponding techniques. The concept of existent multiple positions in the self provide a new perspective for explaining mental illness and psychotherapy process. Psychotherapy techniques based on the Dialogical Self Theory are flexible and can be integrated into other psychotherapy methods as micro techniques. Future research and practice need to focus on the following aspects: First, further improve and enrich the Dialogical Self Theory based psychotherapy, explore its combination with other therapies, create more operational "sub-technologies" and reinforce its breadth in horizontal direction. Second, actively explore Eastern psychology ideas of the Dialogical Self Theory based psychotherapy, realize the localization and recreating of techniques and strengthen its depth in vertical direction. Third, promote the application of the Dialogical Self Theory based psychotherapy and conduct actual tests on its effects in clinical practices.

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