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# The Heterogeneously Distributed Self

Stanton Wortham

*University of Pennsylvania*, [stanton.wortham@bc.edu](mailto:stanton.wortham@bc.edu)

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# The Heterogeneously Distributed Self

## **Abstract**

Recent work in "distributed" and "situated" cognition has moved away from psychological structure as the primary explanation for human understanding. Instead, structures at various levels of explanation - at least the linguistic, social, cultural, interactional, and mental - together constitute successful cognition. Analogously, this article argues the self is not primarily a psychological entity, but instead emerges from structures at various levels of explanation. The article focuses on the level of interactional positioning in conversation to illustrate how non-psychological structure can partly constitute the self. It focuses on the interactional positioning done by narrators as they tell stories about themselves and describes the interactional functions of autobiographical narrative discourse. Bakhtin's theory of language's interactional functions is drawn and applied to one life story.

## **Comments**

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## THE HETEROGENEOUSLY DISTRIBUTED SELF

STANTON WORTHAM

Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

*Recent work in "distributed" and "situated" cognition has moved away from psychological structure as the primary explanation for human understanding. Instead, structures at various levels of explanation—at least the linguistic, social, cultural, interactional, and mental—together constitute successful cognition. Analogously, this article argues, the self is not primarily a psychological entity, but instead emerges from structures at various levels of explanation. The article focuses on the level of interactional positioning in conversation to illustrate how non-psychological structure can partly constitute the self. It focuses on the interactional positioning done by narrators as they tell stories about themselves and describes the interactional functions of autobiographical narrative discourse. Bakhtin's theory of language's interactional functions is drawn on and applied to one life story.*

Psychology used to claim phenomena like knowledge and identity for its own. The fact that people often seem to know what they are doing was explained in terms of mental processes and representations. The fact that people generally experience themselves and others as relatively coherent beings was explained in terms of a psychological self. In recent years, however, psychology's claim on these phenomena has been weakened. We now know that knowledge depends in part on the structure of the world (Gibson, 1979), in part on cultural organization (Cole, 1996; Shweder, 1990), and in part on interactional and other situational patterns (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997). We no longer explain knowledgeable action solely in terms of psychological processes and representations. Instead, structures from several different levels of organization together facilitate knowledgeable action.

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Address correspondence to Stanton Wortham, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216, USA. E-mail: stantonw@gse.upenn.edu

This article makes a similar argument for identity and the self. Instead of positing a psychological self as the primary explanation for coherent experience and stable self-presentation, I suggest that structures from several different levels of organization contribute to a coherent self. Similar arguments about the self have been made before. Gergen (1991, 1994) and Shotter (1993a, 1993b), for instance, argue that psychological structure cannot suffice to explain self-coherence, because social and relational patterns contribute essential structure to the self. This article contributes to the project articulated by Gergen and Shotter, by sketching a systematic approach to one type of interactional structure—the interactional positioning that narrators accomplish by using the social functions of speech—and by showing how structure at this level can partly constitute the self.

### THE CONCEPT OF HETEROGENEOUS DISTRIBUTION

*Distributed cognition* refers to the discovery that capacities of the individual mind do not suffice to explain some knowledgeable action. Hutchins (1995), for instance, describes how the knowledge necessary to navigate a large ship is distributed across members of the crew. Each individual crew member has only pieces of the relevant knowledge, but together they know how to navigate the ship. Hutchins and others have suggested that knowledgeable action often takes this form: individuals have only pieces of the knowledge and skills necessary, but they rely unproblematically on the knowledge and skills of others to accomplish their tasks. An outside observer might be tempted to describe all the knowledge manifested in the successful action (e.g., navigating a ship) as one coherent structure, and then to attribute this full knowledge to an individual mind (perhaps the captain's). But this explanatory strategy would inaccurately reduce a social phenomenon to a psychological one.

*Situated cognition* goes beyond distributed cognition, by describing how knowledgeable action depends not only on others' knowledge but also on non-cognitive artifacts and structures. Hutchins (1995), Lemke (1997), Wertsch (1998), and others have described how knowledgeable action emerges from *systems* of minds and artifacts. Much of this work draws on pioneering insights by Bateson (1972) and Vygotsky (1935/1987). Hutchins, for instance, describes how pilots use "speed bumps"—physical objects that go onto speed gauges—in order to remind them about actions they should or should not take. These speed bumps provide a simple example of what Wertsch calls *cognitive tools*, objects that provide part of the structure people use to think. Lucy (1992)

provides much more complex examples, by describing how grammatical categories of diverse languages provide structure that can facilitate the cognitive accomplishments of people who speak those various languages. In both simple and complex cases of tool-mediated cognition, the full cognitive structure required to explain knowledgeable action does not exist in any individual mind. Knowledgeable action depends on a diverse set of structures (e.g., from language and from relevant physical objects) that supplement and organize whatever is going on in individuals' minds.

Lave (1988) sums up the fact of situated cognition like this: "'cognition' observed in everyday practice is distributed—stretched over, not divided among—mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings (which include other actors)" (p. 1). Note that she denies a simple division of neatly-packaged substructures across different levels. Instead, the overall cognitive structure that explains knowledgeable action emerges from an interconnected system of partial structures at various levels. I have described this situation with the term *heterogeneously distributed cognition* (Wortham, 1998). In this phrase, I use *distributed cognition* to refer to the supra-individual character of cognitive accomplishments. I use *heterogeneous* to refer to the importance of different kinds of structure in explaining knowledgeable action.

### NARRATIVE AND THE SELF

In this article I suggest that the concept of heterogeneous distribution can usefully be applied to other phenomena traditionally explained in psychological terms—particularly to the self. Psychologists have most often explained both the subjective experience and the objective manifestation of a coherent self by positing psychological structures or processes. I suggest that positing a psychological self is misleading in the same way as a psychological explanation for the cognitive structure manifested in knowledgeable action is misleading. There is some structure at the level of the individual that contributes to coherent identity, just as there is some structure in the individual mind that contributes to knowledgeable action. But structures essential to a coherent self come from various other levels as well. The self is heterogeneously distributed because a coherent self emerges from the interconnection of structures of diverse sorts, which together facilitate the experience and manifestation of a coherent identity.

A full theory of the heterogeneously distributed self would require descriptions of the various sorts of structure that contribute to the self, and an account of how these various structures interrelate.

Such a theory would cite the structures that have been proposed to explain groups (Bion, 1961) and family systems (Goolishian, 1990), cultural patterns (Shweder & LeVine, 1984), meaningful objects (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), and linguistic categories (Johnstone, 1996)—all of which likely contribute relevant structure to the self. Because this sort of integrative theory would require much more space than I have in this article, I focus here on one type of structure that can contribute to the self: the interactional positioning that narrators accomplish by using the social functions of language. I describe how patterns at the level of verbal interaction can contribute structure to the self. This will not prove that the self is heterogeneously distributed, but it should make the concept of a heterogeneously distributed self plausible enough to warrant further research.

I choose to focus on interactional patterns in narrative discourse, in particular, because so many have suggested that the self gets partly constructed in autobiographical narrative—that is, that we contribute structure to our selves by telling stories about ourselves. This narrative self-construction happens prototypically in therapy, where a powerful new narrative of the self can redirect a life. But everyday autobiographical narrative can accomplish the same thing, though often incrementally. There has been one predominant explanation for autobiographical narratives' power to construct the self (cf., e.g., Anderson, 1996; White & Epston, 1990): telling the story of one's life gives a narrator the opportunity to redirect that life, by offering a coherent story that foregrounds a certain perspective or direction. An autobiographical narrative has power when it foregrounds one particular description, despite other possibilities, and when that description becomes compelling enough that the narrator acts in accordance with the characteristics foregrounded in the narrative. "Foregrounding," according to Polkinghorne (1988), Schafer (1992) and others, is accomplished through *emplotment*. An autobiographical narrative selects some from among the many events of a life, and places them in a sequence that leads toward some ending or resolution. Sometimes this plot can become compelling for the narrator, such that he or she steps into the story and begins to act in its terms.

I agree that plot is important, but I argue that we need a broader account of narrative in order fully to explain the power of autobiographical narratives. Here I follow Gergen and Kaye (1992) and Gergen's (1994) argument that the dominant approach to self-transformation in autobiographical narrative is promising but nonetheless problematic. On the predominant account narrators use the *representational* power of language to describe a particular version of themselves, and then act in accordance with this represented version. Gergen and Kaye argue that this account inappropriately privileges the representational

function of language, and too easily falls into problematic dualist assumptions about human nature. They argue that a more adequate explanation for the power of autobiographical narrative will cite the *interactional* functions of life stories in ongoing interchange. The act of telling an autobiographical narrative is a performance, which can have various effects depending on the interactional context of that telling. Gergen and Kaye suggest that autobiographical narratives might have power because of their interactional effects, not just because they represent certain characteristics of the narrator.

In this article I follow up Gergen and Kaye's suggestion, by exploring in more detail how interactional structure created through the telling of an autobiographical narrative might partly constitute the self. When narrators tell stories about themselves, it turns out that they deploy the interactional functions of language in systematic ways. Thus the telling of an autobiographical narrative can create interactional structure, and this structure might help organize the self. I begin my description of this process in the next section, by sketching an analytic approach to the interactional functions of autobiographical narrative that draws on Bakhtin. Then I use Bakhtin's approach to analyze a segment from one autobiographical narrative in order to illustrate the process of self-construction through interactional positioning in narrative.

## BAKHTIN'S DIALOGIC APPROACH TO NARRATIVE

Mikhail Bakhtin developed what he calls a *dialogic* approach to analyzing narrative discourse, which was based on his social theory of language and the novel (cf. particularly Bakhtin, 1935/1981, 1963/1984). By *dialogic* he meant several things (see Morson & Emerson, 1990, for a useful overview), but Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogue can be usefully read linguistically, as a pragmatic theory of language use (Silverstein, 1993; Wortham). Most analyses, Bakhtin argues, treat language use as "monologic." *Monologic* discourse is "the word of no one in particular" (1935/1981, p. 276)—it acts as if the social position of the speaker is irrelevant to its meaning. Monologic approaches to discourse assume that we can understand a speaker's meaning with reference only to the structure and content of that speaker's utterance, independent of the speaker's relations with others.

For Bakhtin such monologic approaches can never suffice. He wrote,

The expression of an utterance can never be fully understood or explained if its thematic content is all that is taken into account. The

expression of an utterance always *responds* to a greater or lesser degree, that is, it expresses the speaker's attitude towards others' utterances and not just his attitude toward the object of his utterance. (1953/1986, p. 92)

An utterance does always say something, and it can express the speaker's attitudes, but it also always contributes to the speaker's position with respect to others. This *social* positioning is essential to the meaning of the utterance.

In order to understand Bakhtin's point here, we must first make a central distinction between what Jakobson (1957/1971) calls the *event of speaking* and the *narrated event*. I will modify this terminology slightly, and refer to the event of speaking as the *narrating event*. The *narrating event* is the interactional event within which the speaker utters something—whether this is a therapy session, a research interview, a family quarrel, or whatever. The *narrated event* is the event described as the content of the utterance. Bakhtin's point, put simply, is that we cannot understand narrated content without taking into account various aspects of the *narrating event* in which it occurs. For an autobiographical narrative, then, we cannot understand its meaning solely in terms of its descriptions, themes, and symbols. Its full dialogic meaning will also include how telling that narrative positions the narrator with respect to others in the audience.

Bakhtin argues that all language use must be analyzed using a dialogic approach. But he focuses particularly on narrative discourse because of his interest in the novel as an art form. Bakhtin argues that novelists, particularly Dostoevsky, first systematically expressed the aspect of meaning that comes from dialogue—the fact that people communicate not only by describing objects but also by commenting on others who have spoken about the same objects. More than any other literary genre, novels get their meaning by manipulating the dialogic potential of speech. When they represent characters' speech, for instance, novelists portray those characters dialogically commenting on each other. And novelists themselves convey their own message by articulating it through a dialogue among various speakers. That is, the novelist often does not speak directly (i.e., by *representing* his or her point) on a subject, but instead adopts his or her own position through the juxtaposition of other voices (generally represented as particular characters). For this reason, novels, and narratives as well, must not be reduced to the plot. Novels have plots, but "the plot itself is subordinated to the task of coordinating and exposing languages to each other" (Bakhtin, 1935/1981, p. 365). The full meaning of a novel emerges not only from plots or themes, but also from the juxtaposition

of speakers (including the narrator), who adopt social positions with respect to each other.

In analyzing novelists' dialogic positioning, Bakhtin relies heavily on the concepts of *voice* and *double voicing*. Bakhtin begins his definition of *voice* by observing the "internal stratification" of language, which he also calls *heteroglossia* (1935/1981, p. 263). *Heteroglossia* refers to the natural state of language, where any given language contains within itself forms associated with a wide variety of social groups:

Language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. . . . All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life. (Bakhtin, 1935/1981, p. 293)

The social world is composed of many, overlapping social groups—religious groups, family groups, ethnic groups, and so on. These groups can be defined by social position and by ideological commitments. According to Bakhtin, "Certain features of language take on the specific flavor" of particular groups (1935/1981, p. 289). *Dude*, for instance, would not normally be a word used by elderly Episcopalians. In speaking, we inevitably use words that have been used by others, words that "taste" of the social locations and ideological commitments carried by those earlier uses. The (indexical) association between particular words and particular social locations provides one type of structure always in play when we speak. Bakhtin emphasizes that the links between words and social locations are flexible. But words nonetheless have a social and ideological "aura" or "echo" because they point to or index certain social positions (1953/1986, p. 88).

Speaking with a certain *voice*, then, means using words that index some social position(s) because these words are characteristically used by members of a certain group. Bakhtin develops his dialogic theory of language use further with the concept of "double voicing." *Double voicing* is the process through which novelists represent voices, as well as the process through which voices develop through contact with others. In his seminal work on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse "the chief subject of our investigation, one could even say its chief hero" (1963/1984, p. 185). Double-voiced discourse "has a twofold direction—it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward *another's discourse*, toward *someone else's speech*" (1963/1984, p. 185). In double-voiced discourse, the speaker's meaning emerges in part through an interaction



with the voice of another, who also speaks through the current speaker's words. In double-voiced discourse "a conflict takes place," as the speaker layers his own intonations over the still live words of another (1963/1984, p. 74).

Novels are built around double-voiced discourse. Bakhtin (1935/1981; 1963/1984) offers many examples. He takes the following illustration from Dickens' *Little Dorrit*:

It was a dinner to provoke an appetite, though he had not had one. The rarest dishes, sumptuously cooked and sumptuously served; the choicest fruits, the most exquisite wines; marvels of workmanship in gold and silver, china and glass; innumerable things delicious to the senses of taste, smell, and sight were insinuated into its composition. *O, what a wonderful man this Merdle, what a great man, what a master man, how blessedly and enviably endowed—in one word, what a rich man!* (book 2, chapter 12; quoted in Bakhtin, 1935/1981, p. 304; emphasis Bakhtin's)

In Bakhtin's analysis, this passage begins with a "parodic stylization of high epic style" (p. 304). The first two sentences might echo the thoughts of Merdle himself—Merdle the self-satisfied businessman, who fancies himself as important as royalty. The italicized portion is "a chorus of his admirers in the form of the concealed speech of another" (p. 304). These words echo with the voice of Merdle's hypocritical admirers, who sing his praises only because they want to share in his wealth and fame. Bakhtin called the last seven words *authorial unmasking*. Here Dickens replaces all the earlier praises with the single word *rich*, and thus showed the irony of Merdle's view of himself and the hypocrisy of his sycophants.

In this passage, then, Dickens juxtaposes at least three voices: Merdle, his admirers, and those like Dickens himself who appreciate the irony of the situation. Figure 1 represents this account. Within the narrated event, we have Merdle and his fawning admirers. These characters are described using cues—largely a modified form of quoted speech, which represents the thoughts or words of characters as if they were being spoken—that point to or index certain groups in the socially stratified world: self-satisfied businessmen and their sycophants. Dickens himself also adopted a position in the narrating event, with respect to those two other groups, by laughing at them and exposing their hypocrisy.

In this passage Dickens' descriptions are double voiced because they echo with the voices of Merdle and his admirers and with the voice of Dickens commenting on these other voices. The meaning of such double-voiced discourse is essentially dialogic because it not only

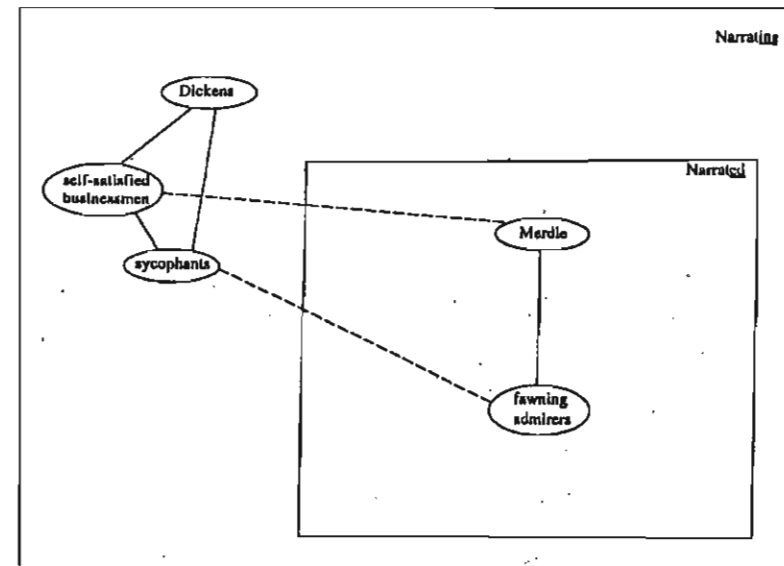


FIGURE 1 Double voicing. The outer rectangle in the figure represents the narrating event, in this case the position of Dickens himself within the larger society. The inner rectangle represents the narrated events described in the text.

presupposes certain voices for the characters, but also makes a point by juxtaposing these characters in this way. That is, the characters and the author have a metaphorical "dialogue" at the level of the social positions that their words represent. In this case, the dialogue (the social positioning of narrator and characters, with respect to each other, for the sake of expressing some point) is relatively simple: self-satisfied businessmen like Merdle admire themselves for their worldly success. Their sycophants admire them for this too. This admiration from others makes the businessmen admire themselves even more; but people like Dickens think this admiration is ridiculous and is really a disguise for base materialist motives. Note that Dickens makes his point here by *positioning* himself with respect to others in the narrating event, not by articulating that point explicitly.

Bakhtin argues that everyday narrators, like novelists, double voice the characters and events they describe. That is, all narrators position themselves with respect to other voices from the social world, and thus make socially relevant points without stating these points explicitly. Narrative thus involves action (i.e., interactional positioning) as well as representation, and this action often plays an important role in



the overall meaning of the narrative. [In addition to developing this dialogic approach to narrative, Bakhtin also described some linguistic tools for analyzing narrators' interactional positioning, like the focus on quoted speech exemplified in the analysis of Dickens—(cf. Wortham & Locher, 1996, and Wortham, n.d., for systematic descriptions of Bakhtin's analytic tools). Bakhtin's approach to narrative, then, allows us to uncover structures created through interactional positioning. We can use this approach to examine how interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative might contribute structure to the self.

### INTERACTIONAL STRUCTURE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

I claim that interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative can contribute structure to the self. Autobiographical narratives have a peculiar structure, in that the narrator and the main character(s) are the same biographical person. So an autobiographical narrator has the opportunity to position him or herself with respect to past (narrated) versions of him or herself. Just as Dickens positioned himself with respect to the self-satisfied businessmen of his day, autobiographical narrators can position themselves with respect to their past selves. This positioning can tell us what the past self might have been like. It can also tell us something about the present self of the narrator. This is because the narrator establishes him or herself as the kind of person who has emerged from the past (narrated) selves, and who positions his or her present self with respect to those past selves in some characteristic way. The interactional structure that emerges in this positioning between present (narrating) and past (narrated) selves, together with the interactional structure that emerges between narrator and interlocutors in the narrating event, can help organize the narrator's present self.

I develop this argument by analyzing a passage from one autobiographical narrative. This narrative comes from a corpus of life story interviews collected by Dan McAdams (1985, 1993), who has generously allowed me to use these data. Wortham (n.d.) gives more extensive background on the subject and the interview, and a much more detailed analysis of the full narrative. This life story was told by "Margaret Sands," a woman in her late forties. Margaret had responded to an ad requesting adult participants for a psychological study. The interviewer was a female graduate student training to be a clinical psychologist, and the interview took place in a research lab at a university psychology department. The life story analyzed here lasted

about 50 minutes, and was the first component of the interview. In these 50 minutes the interviewer prompted Margaret only with the request that she tell the story of her life, as if it were a novel divided into chapters.

Margaret began with the setting for her story. Her mother was a writer and was Jewish; her father was a businessman, and Protestant. Her maternal grandparents disapproved of the marriage from the start, and it in fact ended in divorce when Margaret was 6. After the divorce her mother needed to work full time, and did not know what to do with her child. For some reason she consulted with a priest, and went along with his recommendation that she send Margaret to a Catholic boarding school. Margaret referred to this chapter in her life as "the institutionalization of a human being." She was ostracized because of her non-Catholic background. She was beaten and humiliated by the nuns who ran the school. She spent 4 "horrendous" years there, seeing her mother only occasionally. Margaret still vividly recalls the day she left this school, much as a prisoner might recall leaving jail after serving a long sentence.

Her mother took Margaret out of that school in order to return to her parents' home in Louisville. After a brief time in which Margaret had trouble adjusting to her grandparents' Jewish neighborhood, Margaret's mother decided to "institutionalize" her again. Her mother again took advice from someone, and apparently did not realize the nature of the institution. Margaret was sent to a boarding school for "delinquents" and "street people." She was beaten up, her belongings were stolen, and she was miserable. At age 13 she ran away from the school and "blackmailed" her mother. She called home and refused to tell her mother where she was, until her mother promised not to send her back to the school.

Her mother acquiesced, and moved out of the grandparents' house into an apartment with Margaret. This was a more pleasant period for Margaret than the two institutionalizations, but there were still problems. They lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, where Margaret was ostracized because she was considered Gentile. Both she and her mother did appreciate the quality of the schools, however. But when it came time for Margaret to go to high school, school district boundaries dictated that she had to attend a lower class high school where she again felt out of place. She did well in school nonetheless, and despite the lack of encouragement from her mother and grandparents—who expected young women simply to get married—she went on to college afterward. But she ended up dropping out, and going to work.

In her early twenties she had (what she describes as) an "affair"

with a man from her neighborhood, and she got pregnant. Because of her relatives' discomfort with the prospect of single parenthood, she decided to give the child up for adoption. So when her daughter was born Margaret brought her to an orphanage in downtown Louisville. Her experience at the orphanage represents a pivotal moment in Margaret's life story. At the orphanage Margaret found herself about to do the same thing to her daughter that her mother did to her. At stake was the future direction of Margaret's life: would she, like her mother, allow her own life to run along the lines recommended by others? Or would she break out of this pattern?

In the following excerpt from the transcript Margaret describes her experience at the orphanage. Wortham (n.d.), contains a much more detailed transcript and analysis. In this transcript an italicized syllable indicates stress. The pauses in this passage range from 1 to 6 seconds.

- . . . I was being heavily *pressured* by, *society*, my own *thoughts*, by Robert [the baby's father], by my *mother*, to give the child up. [pause] On the night of August *fifth*, I went into *labor*, went into the *hospital*, and at *two* o'clock in the morning on August 5 *sixth*, 1961, I gave birth to a, *beautiful* baby girl. [pause] While I was in the hospital, I called, *again* by recommendation St. Peter's Orphanage. [pause] At the time, there was a *shortage* on good *White* babies. [pause]
- 10 And a *very vile* woman at St. Peter's Orphanage, *agreed* to take my baby until I could make a decision. So I took my, my darling Kelly [pause] um [pause] [crying] [voice quivering] to St. Peter's on Thirteenth Street [pause] and *left* her there for *two* weeks. [pause] Two of the *hardest* weeks of my life. [long pause] And when the *two* weeks were up [pause] I went *down* there, 15 and this *horrendous* person had these *papers* out for me, to *sign*. She had a *family* all lined up. [pause] There was a [pause] there was a *shortage* of, like I say, in *those* days [pause] a *nice* good *White* baby was a, in *short* coming. A good *healthy* baby. [Sniff] She handed me the *pen* [pause] and I *couldn't* do it [pause]
- 20 I said, *bring* me my baby. [pause] I want you to know this woman *yelled* at me [pause] and tried to *guilt-trip* me. She said, how *dare* you do this to me! I made *place* for your baby. I helped you out. You *have* to sign these papers! I said, I don't have to do anything of the *sort*. I want my 25 child! And at first she *refused* me. And I said, I want my baby. And she practically threw a *temper* tantrum right there in the office of St. Peter's, and was *screaming* at me because she had made *room* for my baby and she *wanted* my baby. They brought, my *darling* baby to me, who had [pause] her *skin* on her *feet* and her *legs* was totally *scaled* [pause] I think they *left* her *alone* for 30 two weeks. . . .

Note that Margaret says she called a Catholic orphanage "again by recommendation" (Line 6). Her use of the word *recommendation*, especially coupled with *again*, clearly presupposes her mother's earlier experiences with the two institutions. That time, Margaret's mother had to make the decision whether to give Margaret to an institution. By pointing back to her own experiences as an institutionalized child, Margaret presupposes four voices that she has established earlier in her narrative: a self-interested "recommender," who talks a mother into giving up her child; a weak mother who abdicates responsibility for her child; a helpless child given over to the institution; and abusive representatives of the institution. When Margaret describes her own experiences as a mother at St. Peter's orphanage in the above passage, these familiar voices reappeared in the guise of different characters.

Margaret does not say who actually recommended St. Peter's orphanage, but she does list society, Robert, and her mother as the people pressuring her to give the baby up. Robert, her mother, and her grandparents (who probably represent "society" here) would all benefit if Margaret were to choose adoption: Robert would avoid alimony; and her relatives would avoid the scandal of an unwed mother in the family. So these characters all speak with a voice familiar from earlier in Margaret's narrative: self-interested people pressuring her to send her baby to the institution. Robert and Margaret's mother actually speak with two familiar voices in this segment: as self-interested advisors, and as potential caregivers who abdicate their responsibilities toward Margaret. (As Bakhtin (1963/1984) notes, particular characters can speak with more than one voice). The abusive institution is represented by the "vile," "horrendous" orphanage woman (Lines 9, 15). *Horrendous* is a term Margaret used earlier in her narrative to describe the abusers and the abusive conditions in her two childhood institutionalizations, and thus it helps establish a similar voice for the orphanage woman. And finally, like Margaret herself at age 6, her new baby must simply endure being institutionalized. So this passage from Margaret's narrative contains the voices of self-interested advisors, ineffective caregivers, an abusive institution, and a helpless child.

This passage also contains two voices for Margaret's narrated selves, which Margaret has also developed earlier in her narrative. I refer to these as her *victimized* and her *competent* voices. Up until the pivotal section of this segment (Lines 19–28), Margaret herself spoke as a passive victim. She gave in to her family's pressure and gave her child to the recommended institution. Figure 2 represents the narrating and narrated events right before Line 19.

The figure represents Margaret underneath the interviewer in the narrating event, because the distance between narrated and narrating

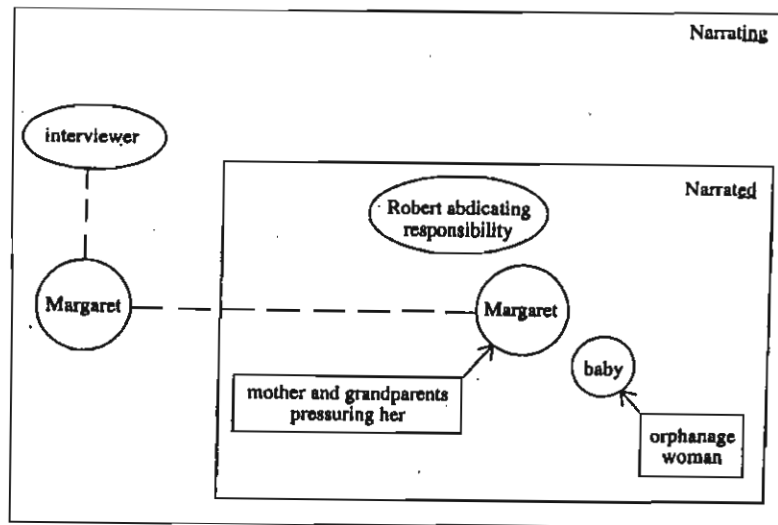


FIGURE 2 Margaret passive at the orphanage. The outer rectangle in the figure represents the narrating event, in this case the interaction between Margaret and the interviewers. The inner rectangle represents the narrated events described in the text.

selves breaks down at this point (Line 11). Margaret *enacts* how these past experiences are still deeply affecting her by crying in the narrating event. I will return to analyze the interaction between Margaret and the interviewer in the narrating event below, after finishing a description of the voicing in this passage.

As she did during her second institutionalization, when she escaped from the boarding school and "blackmailed" her mother, Margaret develops from passive to active during the narrated event at the orphanage. This happens in the pivotal section from Lines 19 to 28. These lines accomplish particularly rich voicing and double voicing, largely because of the dense use of quoted speech. Margaret and the orphanage employee both represent two distinct voices in the encounter described in these lines. At first (Lines 19–24) the orphanage woman spoke like an authority figure: she "yelled," she "tried to guilt trip" Margaret, and she said "how dare you do this to me." These descriptions of how the woman spoke presuppose a common type of speech event, with recognizable voices. The woman was like a parent and Margaret was like a recalcitrant teenager. In her presentation of the rest of the interaction, however, Margaret the narrator switches the characters' voices. From Lines 24–28, Margaret speaks like an adult. She is rational and even-tempered, saying "I don't have to do any-

thing of the sort; I want my child" in a controlled, matter-of-fact way. The orphanage woman reacts to Margaret's maturity and competence like a child that isn't getting what she wants: she "practically threw a temper tantrum" and "was screaming" at Margaret.

Note particularly the contrast between *yelling* and *screaming* in these lines. Typically, adults yell and children scream. This contrast sums up the course of this encounter between Margaret and the orphanage woman. It is a reversal or a rout. Margaret is treated like a child, but she responds like an adult and reduces the institution's representative to a screaming child. In the narrated event Margaret has asserted her rights as a parent, against the prejudices of society and against the evils of the institution, and she steps forward to care for her child. This reversal of her relationship with the orphanage woman is so powerful, and so artfully presented, that the reader or hearer has to admire Margaret's resolve and share her sense of triumph. In listening to the interview (and to some extent in reading the transcript) at this peak moment, one feels that a triumphant development has occurred. Margaret seems to have overcome her passive, victimized self and developed her active, competent self once and for all.

Margaret-the-narrator achieves this sense of triumph by skillful double voicing. She positions her present (narrating) self along the developmental trajectory from her victimized to her competent self. That is, the adult woman who narrates this story is herself mature and competent, like the person that Margaret became at the end of this passage. Figure 3 represents this by placing Margaret above the interviewer in the narrating event, to represent her newly competent voice. Margaret also positions herself above the evil orphanage woman, who turned out to have base, childish motives. Note that Margaret does not position herself as one who overcame the institution by force. Instead, in this segment, she positions herself as superior to institutional people because of her maturity and self-assurance. It is crucial to see that *Margaret states none of this explicitly*. Her triumph depends on *positioning* that she does, and thus relied on the interactional as much as the representational functions of language. My analysis of her autobiographical narrative sketches an *emergent interactional structure* that Margaret creates through skillful use of language. This interactional structure, I suggest, partly constitutes her self.

Before fleshing out this argument, however, we need to examine another type of evidence that points to the same conclusion. In addition to positioning her present (narrating) self with respect to the past (narrated) selves and with respect to the other characters she described, Margaret also positions herself with respect to the interviewer. And it turns out that her interactional position with respect to the interviewer

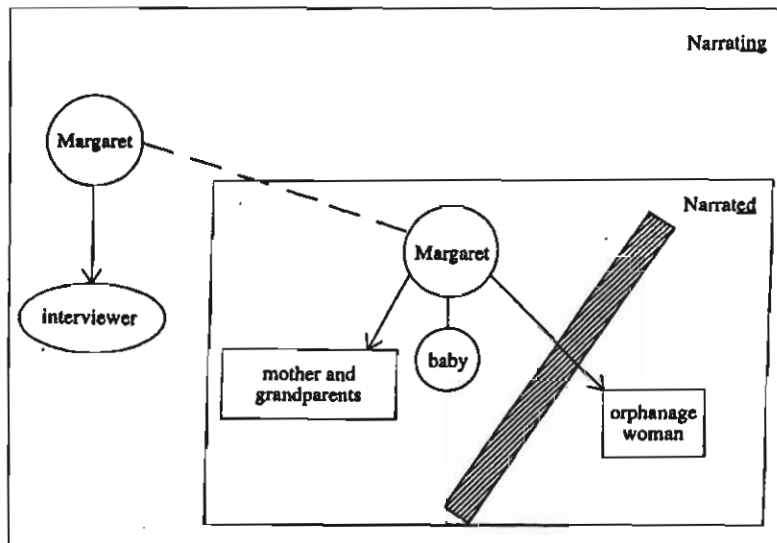


FIGURE 3 Margaret takes control at the orphanage. The outer rectangle in the figure represents the narrating event, in this case the position of Dickens himself within the larger society. The inner rectangle represents the narrated events described in the text.

during this passage undergoes a similar transformation from victimized to competent. The passage begins with the distance between Margaret's narrated and narrating selves breaking down. By Line 6 her narrated self has yielded to pressure and accepted the recommendation to give her baby to the orphanage. She begins to position her narrating self with respect to the orphanage woman here—clearly distancing her narrating self by describing this woman as “vile.” Then Margaret breaks down and cries. As she did at the beginning of the interview, while describing her first institutionalization at Line 11 Margaret *enacts* how much the narrated events still were affecting her at the time of her interaction with the interviewer. Thus she positions herself in the narrating event as someone who has been abused and could use some sympathy. Figure 2 represents this by placing Margaret underneath the interviewer. She has lost control, and no longer dispassionately recounts her story as if it were a piece of data. The interviewer, however, does not respond at all. Margaret positions herself as someone deserving of sympathy, but the interviewer does not adopt a complementary (i.e., sympathetic) position. This leaves Margaret in a difficult spot. She could intensify her plea for sympathy—by adding painful

details or crying harder—or she could return to a more distanced narrating position.

Margaret chose the latter option. She recovers and goes on to describe how she routed the orphanage woman and displayed a mature, competent narrated self. While recounting this episode Margaret *herself* comes to speak with a rational, distanced voice in the interview. It seems as if she uses her description of the transformation in her narrated self to shift her narrating self back to a distanced, competent voice. Note, for instance, that her speech from Lines 21–28 becomes much more fluent (i.e., uninterrupted by pauses). In describing her transformation from passive, victimized (narrated) child to active, competent (narrated) adult, Margaret-the-narrator positions her *narrating* self close to that of the competent adult. At the end of the passage, then, Margaret closely aligns her narrated and narrating selves. They are both competent, mature women. (See Wortham, n.d., for a much more extensive analysis of the interaction between Margaret and the interviewer in this autobiographical narrative.)

Our Bakhtinian analysis of this segment has revealed a complex emergent structure of voices and double voicing. Margaret characterizes people in her narrative, including her own past selves, as speaking with recognizable voices. And she positions her current (narrating) self with respect to these other voices, and with respect to the interviewer in the narrating event. To summarize, she positions herself as a mature, competent woman who has conquered the pettiness of evil institutions and overcome the neglect of weak caregivers. We could not describe this positioning solely with reference to the representational power of language. Margaret's positioning was in part *enacted* without being represented. So now we can return to the concept of a heterogeneously distributed self, and ask, does the sort of emergent interactional structure we have seen in Margaret's self-narrative contribute organization to her self?

## CONCLUSIONS: INTERACTIONAL POSITIONING AND THE SELF

Theorists in several fields have recently developed a “performative” or “constructionist” account of self that would answer this question affirmatively. Work in feminist theory (Butler, 1990; Flax, 1990; Joy, 1993), social psychology (Gergen, 1994), sociology (Gubrium, Holstein, & Buckholdt, 1994) and anthropology (Crapanzano, 1992) has converged on an account of the self as constructed by habitual positioning in everyday practice. All this work criticizes essentialist psychological accounts

of self, which present the self as a coherent entity relatively impervious to context. Instead, these thinkers offer what Butler (1990) calls a *performative* account of self. A self emerges when a person repeatedly adopts characteristic positions, with respect to others and within recognizable cultural patterns, in everyday social action. Margaret, then, would be creating her mature, competent self by habitually positioning herself this way in everyday conversation. The sort of linguistic analysis offered in this article fleshes out a performative or constructionist account of self, by describing more precisely *how* narrators position themselves using the interactional functions of language.

Of course, defenders of the psychological self would have a response here. They would likely acknowledge the rich positioning that Margaret accomplished through her autobiographical narrative. But they could claim that this positioning does not *create*, but instead *expresses* Margaret's underlying self. I confess that this is a difficult claim to refute. No matter how compelling and intricate the analysis of interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative, defenders of a core psychological self can claim that such positioning simply expresses psychological structures that were already there. My strategy in answering this challenge is to reveal the robust, complex interactional structures created in autobiographical narrative, and to argue that psychological accounts of self do not offer the best explanation of these.

Does it really make sense to argue that interactional patterns enacted by narrators simply duplicate pre-existing patterns in the person? Is this not the same mistake as attributing the full cognitive structure of "navigational knowledge," as described by Hutchins (1995), to one individual mind? If the choice were between a purely performative and a purely psychological account of self—that is, if selves were either completely constructed in the performances of everyday life or completely contained within the individual—perhaps it would make sense to defend the psychological self. But I have suggested that a more plausible account would locate self-organization in several different types of structure, including performative, psychological, and other patterns. My analysis of interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative is meant to illustrate one such pattern. I claim that a multiple-level account, an account of the self as heterogeneously distributed, makes better sense than an attempt to reduce all relevant patterns to one level or another.

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## BEYOND THE SELF-SOCIETY ANTIMONY

KENNETH J. GERGEN

Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, USA

*The preceding articles work sensitively and skillfully at the interface between individual and social accounts of the self. Most importantly each confronts the possibility of escaping the self-society binary that has molded the contours of traditional debate. These articles move significantly, then, toward the possibility of relational formulations of being.*

In his pivotal 17th work, *Discourse on Method*, Renee Descartes treated the fact of his mental life as self-evident. In the late 19th century, the obvious fact of an inner sanctum of psychological being provided the basis for establishing a specific science of psychology. In the present century, it is this legacy that also enabled George Kelly (1955) to confidently sketch the terrain of mind and to propose measures of the inner world. Yet, as the romance of cultural modernism has waned, so has critical sensitivity been brought to bear on the self-evident assumptions of the past. Increasingly, we have come to see the conception of individual, psychological selves as historically and culturally situated. Increasingly, we have come to appreciate the ways in which this presumption is woven into the sociopolitical fabric—with both positive and negative consequences. The psychological self has become, then, a matter of deliberation and debate.

Most important for present purposes, the current intellectual climate has yielded an array of resources that conduce toward an alternative to the self of cultural modernism. Through developments in semiotic theory, poststructural literary theory, and rhetorical study on the one hand, and Wittgensteinian philosophy, the history of science and sociology of knowledge on the other, we begin to see knowledge not as a possession of individual minds but of human relationships.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For further discussion of these converging lines of inquiry and their implications for psychology, see Gergen (1994, in press).

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Address correspondence to Kenneth J. Gergen, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, USA.