Remembered Persons and the Self-Defining Memories of Adolescents

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SUMMARY

The focus of this paper is on the role of remembered persons in the self-defining memories of adolescents. Remembered persons are individuals, either a real person or a fictitious character, affecting the ongoing attempts of people to negotiate identity and position the dialogical self. They function to expand the 'society of mind' (Hermans, 2002) of the dialogical self, providing social, emotional, moral and behavioural cues for daily living. In a pilot study with 12 first-year psychology students at a local university, I explored the identity, relationship and function of remembered persons in self-defining memories. Interpretations revealed that parents and family members, as well as teachers and peers featured most prominently as remembered persons providing cues for pursuing agency and communion and a moral career appropriate for the local context. Privileging the various dialogues existing in the imagination adolescents came to experience the multi-voiced self.

INTRODUCTION

Developmental psychologists have long been exploring the many ways in which the presumed fragmented self of childhood unifies during the adolescent period of life to form a coherent sense of identity (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2000; McConville, 1995). In the process of defining the self in the transition between childhood and adulthood, adolescents grapple with multiple selves, many of which appear to be contradictory. A period of self-reflection emerges in an attempt to reconcile the different selves and to determine which is the 'real me'. Contemporary theorising about the self from the perspective of social constructionism accepts the notion of multiplicity of the self as increasingly populated with the character of others (Gergen, 2009). In the conceptualisation of multiple selves, others contribute to inner dialogues, private discussions and conversations about different events and persons. Mary Gergen (2001) refers to these internal conversation partners as *social ghosts*. The concept of "social ghosts" is a much neglected topic in developmental psychology research most likely because conversing with imagined others is generally considered immature or even abnormal (Gergen, 2001).

In this paper, I explore the concept of 'social ghosts' from the angle of the dialogical self-theory (Hermans, 2001, 2002). I will refer to 'social ghosts' as remembered persons in order to avoid the negative associations ghosts may have for some people. My main premise is that remembered persons actively participate in the continuous internal conversations and self-reflections of adolescents and thus contribute to the integration of the complex, dynamic, social, cultural and personal positioning of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001). In the process of defining themselves, adolescents constantly reposition the multiple voices from the past and the present into a dynamic multiplicity of several internal *I*-positions. In the second part of the paper, I present a brief explication of remembered persons in the self-defining memories of adolescents as represented in a pilot study in Macao.

Dialogical self-theory, remembered persons and the multiplicity of self

Hermans (2001) defines the dialogical self as primarily discursive and situated in the conversation between voiced positions. The self is rooted in relationship and in co-action and co-creation, continuously unfolding in conversations that become "increasingly inter-knit, with meaning always in motion" (Gergen, 2009, p. 42). In the dialogical self, two concepts combine in a single construct: dialogue and self. The concept "dialogical" means to relate and usually refers to a conversation between two or more people or telling a story to a receptive audience. People are continuously in dialogue both internally (intrapersonal) with imagined others (remembered persons) and externally (interpersonal) with real-time others thus co-

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constructing the self through social interaction. In these conversations, the individual adopts a particular position from which to engage in the dialogue with multiple conversation partners (Hermans, 2001; Ho et al., 2001; Gergen, 2001; Raggatt, 2007).

A remembered person according to Gergen (2001) is someone with whom one has had a relationship in the past, either a real person or a fictitious character in literature, and who influenced and is still influencing one's thoughts, feelings, values and behaviour patterns in the present. For the most part one has imaginary interactions or inner dialogues (Hermans, 2001) with the remembered person. In these imaginary conversations with significant others from the past one therefore co-constructs life that is beneficial to others as well as ourselves (Gergen, 2001). Hence, remembered persons represent the internal dialogues one has when negotiating her/his identity construction, re-construction and multiple "I" positioning. During late adolescence, the dialogical self emerges as an integrative configuration of self-in-the-adult-world. The adolescent selects some voices from the past and discard others in accordance with his or her interests, talents and values. The older adolescent achieves a sense of self, self-dependence and self-ownership through a process of internal factional conflicts that have their origins in the surrounding culture, and coalitions and tensions among multi-voiced positions of the self (or selves).

Internal dialogues are not an unfamiliar phenomenon in psychology. Vygotsky (1962) as well as Piaget (1955) indicated forms of talk that developed in childhood as the individual prepares for self-communications and engaging in imagined conversations when making decisions. Remembered persons form a bridge between past and present, reminding us of our embedded existence in the social realm, and our existence beyond the immediate context. Although cognitive/developmental psychologists previously tended to minimise the importance of imaginary discourse as children age, newer trends in identity research acknowledge the internal voices of self and others as ways of constructing social reality and not as indicative of immaturity or disability (e.g., Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Gergen, 2009; Kraus, 2006; Singer, 1995). Life story remembering and self-defining memories form the basis of identity construction and storytelling—both to a real-life and to an imagined audience—is one way of creating unity in the self (McAdams, 2001). To the extent that the modern 'I' can relate the 'me' as a meaningful story and participate in the multiplicity of conversations with real-life and imaged others, the 'I' succeeds in meeting the challenge to construe the self as a dynamic, multi-levelled project that is integrated across time and social space.

Storytelling is inherently a unifying, integrative, synthesising process. Access to the complex whole of past experiences through memory and anticipating the future imaginatively on the basis of past experience contributes to the synthesising function and the construction of personal identity. Self-reflection, self-defining memories and imaginary conversations underlie the process of storytelling and tend to be especially vivid, affectively intense, and familiar—a recounting of one's life involving time, space and social action in the process of self-making (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Thorne, 2004). Through a continuous process of active reflection and mediated action, and in conversation with remembered persons, the adolescent positions and repositions the dialogical self in relation to internal and external psychosocial demands and expectations. Self-defining memories thus provide a reflective framework for considering how experiences and previous interactions with significant others are rendered meaningful. These memories blur the boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction', and allow for a multiplicity of 'truths' (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The memories of interactions (fictional or otherwise) with remembered persons are not merely descriptive of experiences but also constitutive. That is, these memories do not merely describe an independent objective reality but an active and collaborative process that constitutes the identity co-construction process during adolescence.

Conversing with remembered persons has much in common with the everyday conversations in which people co-construct the self through language and in interaction with others. In the process of presenting the self in these interactions, the individual dialogues with a wide range of different and conflicting positions and relationships, and integrates past relationships and conversations with significant others or remembered persons with present experiences and future expectations (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Hermans, 2001; McAdams, 2001). The individual engages in conversations with multiple voices inside the self (internal voices) and others in the outside world (external voices) to establish her or his social and personal positioning. She or he takes different stances in these conversations and in a growing capacity to remould and reconstruct identity in accordance with social expectations and personal aspirations (Tappan, 2005).

REMEMBERED PERSONS IN SELF-DEFINING MEMORIES

The central questions for the pilot study were: (i) h*ow do remembered persons feature in the self-defining memories of adolescents,* and (ii) *what is the function of these remembered persons as co-constructors of self in the present?* A multiple case-study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET; Van Schalkwyk, 2010) provided a plausible and integrative method with which to study different forms of positioning in the dialogical self, the synchronic and diachronic integration (McAdams, 1993), and the social construction of dynamic interactions with remembered persons in the formation of the dialogical self.

I solicited the collaboration of third year psychology students to collect the field texts. They did this as part of a project of learning in a psychology course, and I trained them in the procedures and utilisation of the CLET and semi-structured interviewing. Soliciting students as fieldworkers had the advantage that they could conduct the interviews in the local language, as they were all Cantonese speaking, the native language of the participants in Macao (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Purposive sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) helped to identify 12 first-year psychology students as participants. Participants were all in the late adolescent phase of their lives (M = 18.42 years, SD = .79), of Chinese-Macao origin and speaking Cantonese. Four males and eight females participated. Participation was voluntary and they signed a written consent protecting their rights and ensuring confidentiality, allowing the fieldworker to record the interview and for the use of materials for research purposes. An independent counsellor familiar with the project content provided debriefing if required.

The steps of the CLET combine collage making with semi-structured interviewing for eliciting self-defining memories, providing a structure within which non-English speaking participants can explore significant attachments, voices from the past, and multiple forms in the dialogical self (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). These steps unfold in five sequential co-actions and meaning making: (i) making of a collage; (ii) story telling; (iii) positioning the dialogical self; (iv) narrative juxtaposition; and (v) self-reflection. In individual, face-to-face interviews of approximately 30-40 minutes, the fieldworkers elicited life story narratives (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). The central question during the interview was *"How does the picture/image represent significant or important experiences and interactions in your life as a young person in Macao so far?"* Further questions prompted participants to tell rich stories about their relationships with remembered persons in their lives. The fieldworkers also transcribed and translated the audio-recorded conversations for analysis and interpretation. Back-translation and checking by a third person ensured accuracy of the translated texts. Working with the translated texts did have a limitation such as losing some of the intrinsic nuances of language (Haiman, 2005). Nonetheless, the transcriptions together with the collage data provided field texts that were rich and worthy of analysis.

I collaborated with the student-fieldworkers to conduct an in-depth thematic and content analysis of the 12 cases considered sufficient for this project as the purpose was not to generalise findings to a larger population but to explore similarities and differences within and across cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2003). The students and I independently analysed the case materials to identify recurring themes in the protocols, and to examine the case materials for general themes, concepts or patterns of interaction that occur frequently across all cases and attempted to determine why such generalities occur (Neuman, 2006). Conducting a thematic analysis for this project implied first an organisation of the CLET data required reading and re-reading the collages and narratives, remaining on the trail of themes, speculations, interpretations and ideas, and focusing on generalities and differences (Josselson, 2006; Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Three key questions (Gergen, 2001) guided the interrogation of data:
(i) How do remembered persons emerge as conversation partners in the self-defining memories of adolescents?
(ii) Who are the remembered person and what was the nature of the relationships the adolescent had (still has) with these persons?
(iii) What function did the remembered persons have in the adolescent's self-defining memories and their daily life?

Finally, we created a story grid for each participant consisting of the denotation inventory, metaphors, and self-defining memories for each image/picture on her or his collage (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Clusters of meaning emerged in a coherent way for both verbal and non-verbal field texts and in relation to the specific research questions. I was thus able to identify the actual and symbolic meanings, potential and real constructions of self and significant attachments and meanings of past and present interactions with remembered persons. The interpretations evolved from rigorously reading the field texts, taking cognisance of the existing literature and theoretical framework, and reflexivity (Watt, 2007) to establish credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings and discussion

The CLET utilises different modes of expression including both language and non-linguistic action (collage making) to support life story remembering amongst adolescents. Self-defining memories that emerged represent a more or less plausible account of the past that function to maintain coherence rather than provide an objective report of what actually happened in their lives (McAdams, 2001). The first question in the analysis concerned the way in which remembered persons featured in the construction of self-defining memories of adolescents in Macao. In their narration of the past through collage making, the voices of remembered persons emerged as continuously dialoguing with the young narrator (the adolescent) in the self-reflection process. Remembered persons featured as representatives of the community and culture in which their lives were embedded and positioned the young person in a particular social-cultural context. Significant attachments and continued dialogue with remembered persons became intelligible in the performance of collage making and distributing images in accordance with the significance of the relationship (Figure 1; see also Figure 2). Note that I reprint all pictures with permission of the participants.

Figure 1: Family and friends as remembered persons

As a powerful expressive channel, the field texts created by the CLET conveyed non-verbal and symbolic messages about how remembered persons featured in their self-defining memories. It was a context-shaping and renewing process (Freeman, 1993). Expressions were not true or false, that is, they were not truth-evaluable. Instead, they were subjective meaning-making actions or co-actions, part of the doing of a certain kind of action in which the adolescent conversed with her or his remembered persons. The performance, an expression of the multi-voiced self on the collage offering a glimpse into the relationships, past and present affecting the self-defining memories and identity construction process.

Identity of remembered persons and relationships

According to symbolic interactionist theory, important persons who influenced one's early formation of self-concept would be likely to serve as social ghosts (Gergen, 2001). Within the humanistic tradition and social learning theories, those figures who have high status, power, or diverse resources, such as fictional characters or famous people would also become role models and potential remembered persons. In Chinese societies, the hierarchical family structure (Lee et al., 2007), demand for obedience and filial piety emphasises the likelihood of those with status and power to become role models. In this pilot project, findings indicated that parents and grandparents, as well as teachers featured most importantly as remembered persons for the adolescents of Macao. Friends, particularly a former boyfriend or girlfriend, as well as fictional characters (e.g., cartoons and fiction writers) also featured as remembered persons with whom the participant maintained an imaginary conversations in her or his daily life. Some extracts from the narratives illustrate this point:

> *I would like to say something about my grandmother. She is the one whom I have most contact with. She had a huge influence on me. She is probably the one that shaped my personality and caused me to become who I am now.*

Father and mother taught me things since a young age. My family members taught me lots of things and had a positive impact on me.

My aunt, which is my father's younger sister, had a great influence on me. I thought she was quite good before. She loved us, especially when my father [custodial parent] *was not around. She also cared about us. But these few years when I grew up, she said things that drove a wedge between me and my mother. I think she is a bad person!*

My parents think that I'm their child and I belong to them. I felt my father would force me to change my ideas, and my mother hit me but she always treated me well. In fact, when I was with them, I had a feeling that I was closing myself in front of them. I think I would be hurt if I opened my ideas and feelings to them.

Grandparents and parents and occasionally an aunt or neighbour emerged as remembered persons. Family members played an important role in the experiences and becoming of young people in Macao because of the interdependence with the family as socialisation agents and educators (Ho, 1998; Sun, 2008). The young child establishes a close bond with a grandparent or parent and conversations prevail and continue to impact identity construction, even in the absence of the other. Teachers, on the other hand emerged as remembered persons through their teaching methods, emotional connectivity to their students, and the special relationships they built with students. Given that young people spend a significant part of their lives in school, it is not strange that teachers will be remembered persons with whom they continue dialoguing in the process of further becoming. Some teachers would feature as positive figures whereas others would feature as a negative figure with which the adolescent maintains a dialogue in an attempt to position her or himself in a particular way opposite from what they remembered.

On the other hand, because Chinese parents are often emotionally absent (Sun, 2008) and grandparents physically distant, the adolescent develops an even closer bond with friends, particularly a boyfriend or girlfriend. The romantic relationship becomes a key process for positioning themselves simultaneously as separate from parents/family (independence) but still in relation to others (interdependence). Group needs and interconnections (Moore & Leung, 2001) find expression in the discursive framework of narrating communion. Although the relationship has long ended, the boyfriend or girlfriend becomes a remembered person with whom conversations continued into the present adding dialogue about the need for love, for consolation, and for building up of one's self-esteem.

Then he is that boy, my best friend. He was very important to me and he has influenced me a lot.

There were different types of friends; some might have different views…for him…er…he was the one who I could share everything with…really everything. He taught me to think about the matter from a different angle. So how to say…I found that he had a great influence on my growth, influence the way I think.

Cartoons and comic characters (Figure 2), movies, actors, authors and other celebrities are also among the remembered persons.

Figure 2: Cartoon characters as remembered persons

These persons and characters represent ideals the adolescent strives to achieve and although fictional, encourage memories of desired characteristics echoing the words of Meyrowitz: "The 'unreal' relationships with media friends are, ironically, often deeper and longer lasting than many real-life ties"

(1994, p.62).

> *...comics at that time, even if I had not read it for long time, it took a large part of my heart...already went into the deep part of my life silently. It let me think of this world in a deeper way. Watching comics was something to me that...er...let me know something, at least have some idea about this world. So the greatest influences are comics...really influenced my life afterwards.*

Remembered persons, irrespective of their identities and the relationship with the participant, provided a discursive framework for responding to the dynamic conflict within the dialogical self. In the conflict between childhood dependence on the family and the prospective separateness and independence in adulthood, youths juxtapose remembered persons and portray them as conversing, often in opposition to both the outside and inside world of imagination (Hermans, 2001). Parents, friends and fictional characters emerge as conversation partners and a way in which the adolescent emancipated from the family home and engaged in repositioning the dialogical self and moving to new temporal-spatial contexts (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Functions of remembered persons

The third important question dealt with the function of the remembered persons in the adolescents' self-defining memories and their daily lives. Remembered persons acted as expansion of the 'society of mind' (Hermans, 2002). As *social models*, remembered persons set standards for appropriate behaviour in different circumstances. They seem to affect social relations and improve competence or satisfaction in daily life activities. In the self-defining memories of Macao youths, remembered persons represented the societal rules and prescriptions for proper behaviour, both in relation to others and with regard to the self.

> *...my mother is a kind person...she cares about others and I also want to be other-oriented.*
>
> *My grandfather was my role model. After watching these photos, you can refill your energy...find out some power...I will be more hardworking in order to make my grandparents and friends feel proud of me.*
>
> *My mother...she always cared about me, she told me that I should treat others wholeheartedly, if you treated others well, other people would also treat you very well.*
>
> *I was wondering if it was appropriate to put a picture of my boyfriend, especially as he was my ex-boyfriend. I spent time to decide whether I should paste several pictures. Afterwards, I felt that there was no need even to think about it...I am not as same as someone who keeps many secrets in mind.*

Reinforcing their sense of self-esteem and providing emotional support in various situations (Gergen, 2001), the participants in this project focused on presenting what they believed to be the appropriate 'face' to the audience. 'Face' is a macro-social discourse in Chinese societies (Sun, 2008) and by back staging the inappropriate and oppositional dialogues, participants presented a sense of self that complied with the expectations of values and norms in society. The audience included both the researcher and the remembered persons as they mentioned how "doing what they thought their social ghosts would approve of gave them a sense of self-satisfaction and confidence that they were doing well" (Gergen, 2001, p. 139). Family members (parents and grandparents), teachers and best friends were particularly important in providing this type of affirmation. Internal dialogues with remembered persons competed with external demands in the process of front staging appropriate 'face'. On one hand, there are expressions of conformity and subordination, and on the other hand a striving for maturity as they assembled the sub-selves and inner voices of childhood and earlier adolescence. The older adolescent thus achieved a sense of self, self-dependence and self-ownership as she or he moved towards becoming somebody who is doing, who is relationship-oriented, co-acting and multi-being (Gergen, 2009).

Agency and Communion emerged as thematic lines, "cutting across behaviour, cognition, and motivation [as] personal values, beliefs, and self-schemas" (McAdams et al., 1996, p. 342). Based in the dialectical self (Ho, 1998) Chinese youths simultaneously strive for agency (e.g., mastery, control, achievement, autonomy, separation) and communion (e.g., interpersonal connections such as love, friendship, intimacy, sharing, belonging, affiliation, care, and nurturance). Although remembered persons provided a sense of both agency and communion, in the absence of parental warmth, friends took a prominent role in creating a sense of communion.

> *This represents that I had learned to be independent...becoming independent...make decisions myself. They* [parents] *trusted me that I would not do these borderline behaviours.*
>
> *I felt very frustrated, depressed, and sad. At that time, I met my girlfriend...she supported me, she encouraged me.....and I felt warm...it was like a light that could lead me out of the clouds...she was like a warm hand that saved me....supported me...I was deeply affected.*

Some participants mentioned that friends had admirable characteristics and despite separation still influenced the way they perceived the world and acted in the present. Bush (2000) explores adolescent relationships with friends and family noting that emotional support emerges from relationship connectedness (i.e., conformity to parents) and relationship separateness (i.e., parental autonomy granting). Both separateness (autonomy, individuation, agency) and alignment (attachment, connectedness, communion) emerge as themes of positioning the remembered persons in the dialogical self. There is a continuous striving to combine the voices of friends with the voices of the family – a striving to assert her or himself as an independent being in the world (agency), and on the other hand find affiliation in attachments with the social world (communion).

...this photo is...my best friends. We knew each other since Form 1 and we always went out together. However, since...after we finished secondary, although we all planned to study at a university in Macao or outside...we still kept in touch. We realized that we are to be parted...but our friendship remained...although the distance is very long, nothing will interrupt our friendships.

Finally, *moral career* as a meta-concept related to how adolescents negotiate different moral positions and explore, for example, contradictory selves, real and ideal, true and false selves, possible/potential selves, and differentiated selves in relational contexts. In the humanistic tradition, the capacity to recognise a discrepancy between real and ideal selves represents a cognitive advance. The construction of identity is fundamentally a moral and reflexive project around issues of value and in response to questions about how to live a good life as opposed to a bad one (Raggatt, 2007). Adolescence is a particular time and space where the young person inhabits or embodies different realities, gets different and often opposing messages, and lives in "a third space, the in between, or [on] the border, where contradictions co-exist" (Barcinski & Kalia, 2005, p.103). In this borderland, remembered persons offer a discursive framework for responding to the moral imperative of society.

She was a star, she did have much more difficulties than I did and negative gossip. She did not give up, and kept on maintaining the image given to the public. She played piano [to relax]. At that time, I really wanted to give up, but I watched her news and felt that...er...if she can do it, why I could not. Because of her I became hardworking, and she had changed some of my views.

A movie, Tom Hanks in "Forrest Gump"... After I watched this film, I thought that so many bad things could happen...unlucky things...wrong things...each of them will cause another thing...and we won't know that thing is good or bad. At the time when I failed to enter university it was not a bad thing, it may be good thing for the future.

Yuki Kaori...she will mainly describe the dark side. When I come to the end, I would have a really deep feeling. It had a kind of meaning. I really enjoy reading tragedy. It gives people actually more meanings related to the real world...tells you that the real world actually will not be too fantastic.

Engaging in imaginary conversations with their remembered persons, adolescents find a way to cope with true versus false selves, and find integration of multiple self-concepts into a coherent sense of self, representing a developmental advance in their identity construction process. The adolescent's ability to integrate thoughts internally, to operate reversal thinking and to coordinate information into systems is necessary for an understanding of concepts such as judgement of right and wrong. They become able to imagine possible and impossible events and think of a range of outcomes and their consequences in conversation with the remembered persons. They negotiate different moral positions and explore, for example, conflicting ideas about the good self and the bad self in the strategic presentation of the dialogical self.

CONCLUSIONS

Exploring the remembered persons in the self-defining memories of adolescents and their imaginary dialogues was an exercise in social construction and co-action (Gergen, 2009). Remembered persons provided the cues for autobiographical remembering within the social-cultural discourse (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The relationship and continued conversations with the remembered persons functioned as mental/cognitive triggers for remembering lessons learnt and insights gained (McLean & Thorne, 2003). The adolescent self becomes increasingly incorporating of a wider world into the self-structure, a world that includes significant others as remembered persons influencing their everyday living. The narratives recorded in this paper attest to an early awareness of remembered persons and the ability to respond to what is already present in the self, in others and in the world. It is an awareness of the emergence of the dialogical self; a self forged in relationship, conversation and co-action with remembered others.

The CLET provided the context and content for understanding some of the complex dynamics evolving

from continued conversations with remembered persons in the self-defining memories of adolescents. It opened up a space for awareness of the different selves, and created a context in which the adolescent could stand back and listen to the internal voices that shaped her or his actions. Discovering the potential voices in forming of the dialogical self has value for theorists, clinicians and others interested in human behaviour and adolescent identity construction. Through privileging the various imagined dialogues, adolescents come to see themselves as multi-voiced and "multi-potentiated" (Gergen, 2001, p.143). Introducing adolescents to their remembered persons—those who might otherwise be inaccessible or distanced—the clinician can assist them in reaching new levels of self-reflection and integration in their identity construction. They may come to understand that conversing with these significant others is not dysfunctional or immature but rather enabling and central to co-constructing a sense of self. A new appreciation can develop for the voices of the past and the teachings of parents and teachers as well as the positive learning experiences, meanings and insights gained from interaction with friends and fictional characters.

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