

Emergent organization in the dialogical self: Evolution of a “both” ethnic identity position

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Abstract

Dialogical self theory, based on principles of self-organizing systems, provides a framework within which diverse views regarding identity creation can be reconciled. The framework encompasses the relatively stable and coherent identity story as well as the more variable, contextually specific identity positionings. We illustrate how these dialogical self processes work together in the identity narration of a young woman who is second-generation Asian Indian, in particular: (a) the context (frame of reference) specificity of system emergence and constraint; (b) the use of macro organizers for both system stability and flexibility; (c) system variability surrounding emergence of a new identity position, I-as-both; (d) the abruptness of emergences; and (e) the developing organization of the new position through causal linking of previously oppositional positions.

Keywords

dialogical self, ethnic identity, identity emergence, microgenetic analysis, narrative, self-organization

The language we use to speak of culture and identity is changing. Not long ago, the talk regarding border crossings was of categories and outcomes—de-identification,

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assimilation, integration, and well-being (Berry, 1998; Berry & Sam, 1997; Castro, 2003; Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002). This is being replaced by a vocabulary of borderlands, hyphenated identities, hybrid positions, and ongoing negotiations between the selves of the homeland and of the new land (Bhatia, 2007; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Lugones, 1994).

Such changes signal the ascendance of a fundamentally different (although not new; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000) way of thinking about person, culture, and how they are envisioned in relationship to one another. People no longer reside in acculturation categories. Culture is no longer monolithic, as in individualistic or collectivistic. The person–culture relationship is no longer one that can be captured by independent and dependent variables. Instead, identities are both social and personal. Dynamic processes take the place of static states. Questions of how identities emerge and are maintained come to the fore, and these are increasingly seen as questions of the narrative creation of identity, requiring interpretive approaches.

Yet within the broad outlines of this ascendant way of thinking there is a sharp division in how identity is viewed, a division which matters for our ability to talk productively with one another about identity creation. This division has given rise to debates over the years, for instance whether self is multiple or unitary, or whether by its nature self is highly variable or relatively stable across contexts. In this paper we join with others who have been illustrating how it is possible to talk simultaneously and in a coordinated way about such apparent oppositions. To do this, we present a microgenetic analysis of an identity narrative told by a young second-generation Asian Indian woman. As introduction to this analysis, we briefly review the nature of the division and its representation within the ethnic identity literature, followed by a description of the coordinating dialogical theoretical framework.

Division

The different lenses through which identity is viewed are exemplified in the following two accounts of self-processes. The first is that of Dora Shu-fang Dien, a woman of Chinese heritage who has described her experiences of living in Taiwan under Japanese rule until the age of 8, and then under Chinese rule through her college years, followed by graduate work in the United States, marriage to an American, and striving to become “the best American mother I could possibly be” (Dien, 2000, p. 14). Her personal story explored the interweaving of personal history and societal history in enabling her to coordinate and synthesize her varied cultural identities in a productive way. She does not experience a sense of self-multiplicity, does not see herself as a “collection of identities,” and she does not believe that most people experience identity in this way. She views self-identity “as a life story that one constructs

and reconstructs throughout life by dialoging with oneself and with others [which] captures well Erikson's (1968) sociohistorical perspective. The outcome of the constant revision is an integrated self which gives one a sense of continuity despite varied experiences" (p. 15).

The second account, by Katherine Ewing, emphasizes "the illusion of wholeness" rather than an integrated self (Ewing, 1990). To illustrate her argument that self-representations are rapidly shifting, contextual, and often inconsistent, she drew upon conversations with a young Pakistani woman, Shamim, with whom she worked during her field research. Shamim's conversation reveals "several distinct self-representations, namely a scholar striving for a PhD and 'progress,' a good wife, a good, obedient and grateful daughter, a good Muslim, a disobedient child, and, more subtly, a clever 'politician' and, implicitly, a son" (p. 253). Within Pakistani culture, some of these representations are inconsistent with one another, yet Shamim makes no attempt to integrate them into a coherent "whole" during the conversation, and in fact does not acknowledge the inconsistencies.

Dien's (2000) account emphasizes unity, integration, and continuity. Transitions from one cultural setting to another are relatively smooth for her, and she experiences her Chinese and American selves to be blended in a coherent life narrative. In contrast, Ewing (1990) emphasizes self-multiplicity, variability, and context specificity. What interests Ewing is the flexibility of self-representations and the semiotic mechanisms that serve this flexibility. People do indeed experience wholeness, but it is a wholeness created from a semiotic process that "highlights and organizes certain fragments of experiences [and]... although such wholes are actually fleeting, they are experienced as timeless" (p. 263). Individuals at times engage in self-reflective integration, but they generally live with inconsistency, often unrecognized.

These alternative conceptualizations are threaded through the ethnic identity literature. For example, Dien's point of view is voiced by Mahmoud (2009), who dismissed a report of shifting ethnic identity positions during a group discussion (reported by Malhi, Boon, & Rogers, 2009) as "pragmatic flexibility that obscures an underlying self-identification that might or might not be consistent with this surface multiplicity" (p. 290). Ewing's position is represented by discourse/conversation analysts (e.g., Day, 1998; Moita-Lopes, 2006), who view identities as discursively constructed, fragmented, and fluid.

Explicit recognition of the legitimacy of both of these lenses in addressing ethnic identity is relatively rare, but Verkuyten and deWolf (2002) do so when they suggest that the focus on situated interactions, which characterizes discourse approaches, might not necessarily preclude concepts of inner predispositions. By inner predispositions they mean more abstract and relatively stable senses of self which may be seen to "guide interpretations and behavior" (p. 394). They called for a reconciliation of these positions but did not offer a framework within which this might occur.

A framework for reconciliation

Principles of dialogical self theory

As formulated by Hermans (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003), dialogical self theory posits an embodied, decentralized, dynamic, social, and spatial self. Self is envisioned as a multiplicity of I-positions that move “in an imagined space... from one to the other position, creating dynamic fields in which self-negotiations, self-contradictions, and self-integrations result in a great variety of meanings” (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003, p. 544). Addressivity is central to the dialogical self; I-positions are constructed in relation to an audience (actual others, imagined others), and thus the basic unit of the dialogical self is the I-Other dyad (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2009).

I-positions are affectively linked meanings, always associated with feelings (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003). They are situated spatially and temporally within the self. Spatially, they inhabit a narratively constructed field of related (similar or contradictory) positions. Temporally, they occur in the here-and-now but orient to the past and future in specific ways, depending upon the particular I-position. The social context serves to frame the possibilities for I-positions, but this context is experienced as fluid and variable rather than fixed, containing many possible dialogues (Hermans, 2001; Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007).

The dialogical self is both innovative and conservative. At times, conflicts or tensions within the self, produced through inner dialogue or dialogue with others, can trigger system reorganization. Hermans (2003) outlined several means by which change in the organization of the dialogical self may come about, for example, via the introduction of new I-positions or the development of cooperation between two positions. At other times, the emergence of new positions is suppressed (e.g., Cunha, 2007). The likelihood of system reorganization is dependent on, among other things, the existing organization of the self-system (Hermans, 2003).

Integration of dichotomies. The dialogical self is a dynamic self-organizing system (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003) of the kind exemplified by Lewis (Lewis, 2000, 2002; Lewis & Douglas, 1998; Lewis & Ferrari, 2001), on whom we base the following discussion. Self-organization refers to emergent organization of systems that occurs without external “instruction” or preformed design (Lewis & Granic, 1999). It is not a single theory, but rather a set of metatheoretical principles that increasingly guide many scientific domains, including developmental science (Witherington, 2007). The underlying principles of self-organization enable dialogical self theory to coordinate and integrate the dichotomies of variability–stability, discontinuity–continuity, multiplicity–unity, and thus to serve as a framework for reconciling the divergent positions within the identity literature.

In real time, at the micro level, the dialogical self is like Shamim's (Ewing, 1990), taking up one I-position (I as a scholar), and then another (I as a good wife), sometimes recognizing contradictions between them, sometimes not. These positions are voiced in dialogue with others, but they also are voiced by Shamim in internal dialogue, as she thinks about the past and anticipates the future. But within systems theory, the ontogenetic level of phenomena is equally important. This is the emergence of more stable, higher-order forms which are an outgrowth of processes at lower levels but are not reducible to them. At this level, a certain I-position organization becomes dominant, and the dialogical self may remain stable for relatively long time periods. I-positions are coordinated through narrative, a life story, or a story about some aspect of a life. Dien (2000) told one kind of story, a story of coordination between I-as-Chinese and I-as-American. Her story might have been of a different sort, one of shifting between oppositional Chinese and American voices, a symbiotic relationship of ambivalence (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Hermans, 2003).

The relatively stable, macro-level dialogical self constrains the voicing of I-positions in real time. For example, a strong I-as-Dutch or I-as-Chinese identity guides and restricts positioning in interaction with others (e.g., Verkuyten & deWolf, 2002). Yet the constraint is not absolute. Identities do change. Change in dialogical self organization comes about through the emergence of new I-positions at the micro level which may, if reiterated, lead to a reorganization of the self system. This reorganization, called a phase shift, can be fairly abrupt and occurs under conditions of system instability, indicated by high variability. Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (2003) used the example of dominance reversals: "dramatic changes in the patterning of positions" (p. 555).

Valsiner's (2002, 2007) explication of semiotic processes of the dialogical self further illustrates these system principles and the way in which the dichotomy of stability and flexibility is coordinated. The dialogical self is not just a proliferation of I-positions. Rather, meanings from experiences become abstracted and coordinated in higher-level semiotic control systems—generalized, hierarchically organized affective meanings—which then regulate lower, less abstract levels, such as everyday interactions. Constraint by the higher-level control systems provides system stability, yet small perturbations can at times rapidly shift the system to an instability. "Hence we can observe remarkable intra-personal variability in meaning-making processes across social situations, yet behind that seeming inconsistency is the process of the dialogical self's semiotic autoregulation" (Valsiner, 2002, p. 262).

Purpose. Based on the above, dialogical self theory can serve as a reconciliation framework for identity scholarship. What is needed at this point is further demonstration of these processes in action, along the lines of work begun by others (e.g., Cunha, 2007, Duarte & Gonçalves, 2007; Duarte, Rosa, &

Gonçalves, 2006). In people's talk about self, we need to show not just how I-positions can be variable, shifting perhaps from moment to moment, and with different frames of reference, but also the way in which constraints operate to maintain system stability, and then how new positions emerge from system instability and may quickly lead to momentary, or potentially longer lasting, system reorganization.

Context of the analysis

Yastha, as we refer to her, was recruited through local contacts by the second author. At the time of the interview (September 2006), she was 20 years old and was attending Texas Tech University as a pre-medical student, living at home with her family in Lubbock, Texas. The Asian Indian population in Lubbock is relatively small (the entire Asian population is approximately 3,600, about 1.4%), as it is at Texas Tech University (all identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander are about 2.8% of 28,000). Thus it is said that everybody knows everybody else within the Lubbock Asian Indian community.

The audio-recorded interview was conducted by the second author, who was at that time a graduate student at Texas Tech and who had lived in India prior to her move to Lubbock. Yastha seemed engaged throughout, and her responses to all of the questions were fairly lengthy, ranging from a long paragraph to several pages of single-spaced transcript. During the first approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes, Yastha was asked about family background and extended family, family relationships, college and friends, culture and ethnicity, and her projections for the future. During the final 45 minutes, she read and then answered a series of questions about each of three vignettes (see Appendix). Vignettes were written by the second author based upon her own experiences and on the literature regarding second-generation Indian adolescents. These vignettes were not deliberately ordered for presentation in any particular way. Questions about the vignettes included what she saw as the issue, whether she had experienced this situation, and whether she thought she acknowledged the differences in her self.¹

Narrative prior to vignettes

Yastha's new I-position, I-as-both, did not emerge until the vignette section, but the first part of the interview sets the stage for this emergence. As demonstrated by the following segments, her narration cycled between affirmation of her dominant identity and exploration of other positions. These segments were not predetermined but rather are based on an analysis of Yastha's narrative.

Segment 1

During the first 45 minutes of the interview, Yastha established a strong (and based on her narration, we can assume pre-existing) I-as-Indian position. In response to the question, “When asked to describe your culture, what would you say?” she responded, “I have the best culture in the world,” and then she proceeded to describe her Indian culture. This dominance was evident in response to other questions as well. When asked, “What influenced you to have family as a priority?” she said, “I guess because, I don’t know, if you’re Indian, pretty much family is the most important thing.”

Yastha described herself as “always happy” (she used the word happy 16 times during this segment), yet she cried on two occasions. The first time was at the beginning of the interview when talking about her grandfather as always “sad” in the United States, and subsequently moving back to India. On the second occasion, her voice began to crack as she talked about the importance of her parents in making education a priority for her, and then how hard her parents struggle. As she continued to talk, her crying increased to the point that the interviewer asked her if she’d like to stop (which she declined).

At the end of this segment, after saying she liked everything about her culture, Yastha mentioned a conflict for the first time, spontaneously, and almost in passing: “Oh, heck! I sometimes don’t know about the whole arranged marriage thing, but other than that, I love our culture.” The interviewer pushed for elaboration, but Yastha avoided answering for the next several rounds of question–answer, instead talking about her lack of knowledge about India:

Segment 2

It was not until the interviewer asked Yastha about differences between herself and her relatives in India, encouraging a shift in her frame of reference, that Yastha began to explore I-as-not-Indian. This segment begins with her statement, “there is a total difference.” Calling upon her grandfather, she contrasted her views with his, saying that he thinks she should learn to cook, and not be so outspoken, and have more respect for her elders. Yastha went on to say that she is “used to” arranged marriages in her family, but is “totally against that.” Asked again about her cultural likes and dislikes, she escalated her objection to arranged marriage: “I think we should have choice.” She anticipated her parents’ reaction to marrying a non-Indian, “my parents would die and turn over in their grave [pause] it’s unheard of,” and recalled that when a cousin married an American, the family stopped talking to her. She then denounced (“we’re really retarded”) the further restriction that they are only supposed to marry people with the same last name, using the strongest language of the entire interview: “Like, that would be one thing that

I hate about my culture is that even though you brought home an Indian person, they didn't have the same last name as you, that would be really bad."

Segment 3

Yastha's frame of reference shifted again when she was asked how her culture is unique, and about her ethnicity. Regarding ethnicity, she said, "I say I'm Indian. I'm Indian or 'a brown,' whichever one comes up." She talked of her brown skin distinguishing her from "Americans" in other people's eyes. Continuing her discourse about her brown skin, she reinforced I-as-Indian: "I mean, as a person, I know that I'm brown and this is part of my identity because I am Indian." She continued to do this in questions about language, "I love talking in Gujarati," and especially in response to the question, "The feeling of what it is like to be Indian-American, has that changed since your adolescent days or remained the same?" Yastha responded, "I think it's changed. I think I became more proud that I am Indian as I get older." She talked of having only Indian friends now (in high school she had a more mixed group of friends) because it's easier—her parents approve "cause we all share the same culture." She cried once again after recalling the death of a good friend's father, "the most devastating thing in the world. After that, I realized, our parents are more than important."

Segment 4

Asked about the issues between her and her parents, Yastha said several times that there aren't any, and then, "The only issue, like, I don't know how to explain, the only issue that we would have is just maybe, all the issues that I see with my parents are later in life. They're not anything now." When questioned about this, she explained, "Like, maybe one day what if I wanna marry someone that's like of my choice. That's the only issue that I see that we will ever have." Thus, I-as-not-Indian regarding arranged marriage was reiterated but then dismissed as relevant for the future, not the present.

Segment 5

Yastha returned to I-as-Indian in this fairly long segment about parents and friends. Potential conflicts were dismissed. She was not allowed to date, and didn't think her brother, who had graduated from college, was allowed to either. "We don't talk about these things." But she said she didn't mind, and that it hadn't come up for her. Her friends are Gujarati. "My parents like that I hang out with them... I love hanging out with them... we deal with the same issues." At another point, talking about whether her issues are different from others', she said, "I think they're different' cause we have different cultures and different values." Her view of herself as happy returned in

this segment: when asked how her parents and friends see her, she emphasized “happy” on both occasions.

Segment 6

The question, “How do you think your life would have been different if you were raised in India rather than in the US?” initiated another exploration by Yastha of I-as-not-Indian. At first she responded that she would be “more cultured” in that she would know more about Indian ways. But she then recalled a cousin who, when she first came from India, “was really all about India, and I was all about America. We clashed a lot because we had two different ideologies.” However, the only evidence she offered for different ideologies was a preference for American versus Indian music. When asked again about differences growing up in India versus America, she said, “I think I would be more Indian. I would understand my culture a lot better, and maybe I would understand arranged marriages a lot more.” She then talked about different cultural views of arranged marriage, and concluded, “So now you have different expectations on both sides.”

Segment 7

Asked to look into the future, Yastha talked of one day getting married and being “really, really sad” to leave home. When asked if she was worried about the future, she seemed to search for her feelings: “No, not really. I don’t know. Sometimes I think I am worried and scared of responsibility. To be honest, yes I think I am.” She talked of being scared of possible changes in the future. Projecting 5 years into the future, she said she might be thinking about getting married, and imagined her mother saying, “‘You need to get married now’ [laughs].” In ten years, “for sure I’ll be married [laughs]. There’s no way that my mom will let me not get married.” When asked whether her identity might change, she reaffirmed I-as-Indian: “I will always have the same values and I will have the same culture. I will still have the same religion... They tell what kind of person you are. Like, what kind of morals you have. They’re, they’re not gonna change.”

Summary

Yastha began the interview with a strong I-as-Indian position (Segment 1). Her narrative from then on was cyclic, with forays into exploration of other positions (I-as-not-Indian, Segments 2 and 4, and I-as-American, Segment 6), but then always returning to a reaffirmation of I-as Indian (Segments 3, 5, and 7). The I-as-not Indian position was narrated mainly with respect to one issue (although she did identify some other differences), arranged marriage, which clearly constituted a major conflict for her, and which she attempted to

dismiss by relegating it to the future. The I-as-American position occurred in just one segment and was supported solely by her preference for American rather than Indian music. Strong feelings, evidenced by crying, were associated with her narration of how much her parents had sacrificed, or how sad her grandfather had been in the US, or the thought of her parents dying. She repeatedly described herself as happy, but these descriptions occurred only in the I-as-Indian segments. Thus, in terms of power relations between positions within Yastha's dialogical self, I-as-Indian dominates. This position constrained exploration of other positions in that she reaffirmed it after every exploratory segment, but it did not completely dominate other possible positions.

Microgenetic analysis of emergence and tentative reorganization

Because Yastha narrated a novel I-position at the beginning of the vignette discussions, our microgenetic analysis began at this point and included the discussion of all three vignettes. The analysis was guided by principles of semiotic self-organization of the dialogical self (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998; Valsiner, 2002, 2005) and by the ways these principles have been applied by others (Duarte & Gonçalves, 2007; Duarte et al., 2006).

Our goal was to show Yastha's dialogical processes of meaning construction, constraints on system reorganization, and how new meanings became organized over the course of the three vignettes. Starting at the beginning of her discussion of Vignette 1, and working sequentially, we identified meaning statements (actually complexes, Josephs & Valsiner, 1998) and elaborations of meanings. For each meaning statement, we evaluated (a) who is speaking—who is the author; (b) whether it constituted a new or previously narrated I-position; and (c) whether she called upon an abstract principle in creating the meaning. The latter, called promoter signs (Valsiner, 2005), or macro organizers, are abstract generalizations that guide the emergence (or not) of future I-positions. Tables 1–3 summarize the content of each meaning statement along with the amount of elaboration of each (number of words) and our commentary.

Vignette 1

All vignettes were first-person accounts of a conflict experienced by second-generation Asian Indians living in the United States. The conflict in the first vignette (Appendix) was about having to act differently in American and Indian settings in order to fit in. In her first few sentences in response to the question, "What do you think is the issue here? Can you describe that?" she: (a) stated a new position, "both" (the word "both" was not in the vignette or previously mentioned by her or by the interviewer); (b) defined "both" as acting two different ways, as not

Table 1. Yastha's Discussion of Vignette I

Yastha's sequential narration (paraphrased)	Commentary
1. The issue . . . being American and Indian, having both (0)	Emergence of "both"
2. They would have to act two different ways . . . can't just be themselves (0)	"Both" as negative
3. We are a whole different breed of people (0)	Shift from "they" to "we"
4. We are both, we mix with both (0)	We as "both."
5. We as different from American and from Indian (0)	Emergence of we as "neither"
6. We . . . as both Indian and American at the same time (0)	Emergence of "at the same time"
7. You don't fit into either, American or Indian (125)	"Neither" reinforced
8. I as more American than my extended family (160)	Not fitting with Indian culture
9. We (Indians) are different from Americans (92)	We (Indian) not American
10. You kinda have to put on . . . It's double standard (112)	Macro: double standard
11. Searching during adolescent years, finally realized " I like my culture." (277)	I-as-Indian
12. We're lucky. Can take the good qualities from each culture (45)	Shift to "both" as positive
13. Things you don't like in Indian culture, still have to do them (48)	Pressure to be Indian
14. But if you chose not to, you can have the freedom to choose (77)	Macro: freedom to choose
15. Acknowledge differences in self? (Q). Think so. Don't know. Not sure (38)	Confusion. Does she claim both?
16. Never forget that I'm from India—skin color, language (116)	Reinforcing I as Indian
17. Maybe I forget that I'm American. "I'm confused now, dang it!" (39)	Am I American?
18. Then reversal. No you can't [forget] because that's where you were born (64)	Evidence that I am American
19. " You can be both. There's nowhere that it says you can't be both" (0)	Return to "both", no elaboration

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate number of words in elaboration of meaning.

being themselves; (c) shifted in the same sentence from "they" to "we," and defined "we" as different; (d) associated "we" with "both"—having to deal with both cultures; (e) elaborated we as "neither"—not fitting either culture; and (f) shifted from "both" as "neither" to "both" as being Indian and American "at the same time."

The issue here is the dealing with being American and Indian, having both. I think they're just dealing with identity problems because they don't know.'

Cause when they would have to act two different ways for two different people. They can't just be themselves,' cause we are a whole different breed of people. I think we are. We are completely different. We are both, we mix with both, having to deal with American issues plus Indian issues. Yet not being an Indian enough for the Indian society and not being American enough to fit into American society. We have to deal [*sic*] transition between being both Indian and American at the same time.

Several things are significant about the initial emergence of the “both” concept. First, for Yastha, perhaps because of her dominant I-as-Indian position, her focus had to shift away from herself, to someone else—“they”—for the concept to emerge. Second, when she linked the concept of “both” with herself, it was an abrupt shift, and was to “we” rather than to “I.” Here she established a new reference group, we-as-second-generation-Indian, not previously narrated. This “we” concept may have given her support for exploring an idea of “both” which was new to her. Third, the initial negative evaluation of “both” (can't be yourself), shifted, again abruptly, to being Indian and American *at the same time*. The shift actually occurs in the middle of the sentence (the first part of the sentence, “We have to transition...” still implies difference and separation rather than sameness).

Yastha's narration of Vignette 1 illustrates three features of emergence within self-organizing systems (in this instance, the emergence of an I-as-both position). First, her meaning statements are highly variable, evidencing much shifting of positions. In the narration subsequent to the above quote (meanings 7–19 in Table 1), she shifted ethnic identity I-positions (pronouns are discussed below) from not fitting either (meaning 7), to American compared with traditional Indian (8), to Indian (9, 11), to not Indian in some ways (13), to not forgetting that she's Indian (16), and after some searching, not forgetting that she's American (18).

Second, the emergence of new meanings can be very abrupt, and often seems to follow in no logical way from the immediately preceding narrative. Yastha's initial definition of “both” (Table 1, meaning 2), guided by the vignette, was having to act differently in Indian and American settings. A negative valuation of both was implied (can't just be themselves). Her shift to a different and positive definition of both occurred in the following portion of the narrative (text associated with meanings 11 and 12):

Then you realize that is not so great [American customs, e.g., teens partying and dating a different guy every week]. And then you're like, I like my culture. And then you realize that your culture is great. By experiencing that, this isn't fun all the time [the partying, etc.]. There are things American culture does that are not that great and I'm not totally American. I mean, there are some things you might not [pause] I guess, we're lucky in the respect we can take all the good qualities the Indian culture has, and we take all the good qualities American

culture has, and we can keep only the ones that we want to keep. In that sense, we're lucky.

We assume that Yastha's elaboration in the first part of the interview of I-as-not-Indian set the stage for the emergence of "both" (Valsiner, 2002). But because even seemingly minor perturbations can cause abrupt shifts in self-organizing systems, we can never know if, or when, or under what circumstances, meaning shifts of this sort will happen.

Third, Yastha's discussion of Vignette 1 illustrates her use of macro meanings (generalized principles, promoter signs) as organizers of her meaning construction and valuation of the meanings (Duarte et al., 2006; Valsiner, 2005). Her initial definition of "both" (meaning 2 in Table 1) is associated with the macro organizer of "double standard" (10), reinforcing its negative connotations. The macro organizer "freedom to choose," which guided the redefinition of "both" (taking the good qualities from each culture, meaning 12), is evaluatively positive, and it is perhaps this macro organizer that promoted her search for evidence that she is American as well as Indian (meanings 17 and 18), and her final conclusion, "There's nowhere it says you can't be both" (19).

Yastha used the pronoun "we" fairly often in this narration, once referring to we-as-Indian (meaning 9), but otherwise referring to we-as-second-generation. Since she had not narrated the latter until this point in the interview, it apparently was facilitated by the vignette in which the speaker identified as a second-generation Asian Indian. As noted by Duarte and Gonçalves (2007), people often alternately identify with different coalitions to support their statements, and they do this with the use of "we." Yastha's identification with second-generation Indians in discussing the vignette likely helped her to explore the "both" concept. "You" also is used by Yastha to refer to the second generation, perhaps as a way to distance herself somewhat from a new position that she is willing to explore, but which is at times confusing for her.

Vignette 2

Yasha described the issues in this vignette as, "This person never talks about how they feel about romance or liking another person... They feel that their parents are their only link to India... They are really close to your [*sic*] parents... they've never been able to... talk to their parents about this, and it frustrates them." After an initial acknowledgement that she wouldn't talk to her parents about these things because it would make them sad (meaning 2), she expressed puzzlement about this aspect of Indian culture (3), and then strongly critiqued it in contrast to American culture (4–6). Although Yastha had never dated, she imagined wanting to date at some future time, and if that happened she anticipated concealing it from her parents (7). At this point, she abruptly switched to "we"

(as Indian) could never disappoint parents because “that’s where our culture comes into play” (8), and said she would forget “that you’re American” in regard to romantic relationships. Finally, she discussed obligation to parents and then acceded to an arranged marriage: “I can do that because I see that they sacrificed so much for me.”

Yasha’s narration of Vignette 2 illustrates two features of the dialogical self beyond those exemplified in her discussion of Vignette 1. The first is that the dialogical self contains many subfields that may or may not engage with one another, even if accessed separately within short time periods. There was no apparent carryover from the narration of Vignette 1 to that of Vignette 2. When the context shifted to romance, sexuality, and inability to talk with parents about these things (Vignette 2), Yasha, as before, explored I-as-not-Indian, deploring the Indian customs surrounding this topic. But instead of recalling her “both” solutions from Vignette 1, or the macro organizer, “freedom to choose” (which she had used earlier in the interview in connection with

Table 2. Yasha’s Discussion of Vignette 2

Yasha’s sequential narration (paraphrased)	Commentary
1. They’re close to parents but can’t talk to them and it frustrates them (99)	Interpretation of vignette
2. Dating and sex—I wouldn’t talk to them about it because they’ll feel sad (125)	Wouldn’t hurt parents
3. We don’t talk about it, I don’t know why it’s like that (91)	Puzzlement about Indian ways.
4. We never say “Hey mom I love you.” We never talk of these things (86)	Contrast with American culture
5. You can’t talk to your parents about something that’s so important? (27)	Questioning Indian ways
6. You should be able to talk about anything. “And it sucks . . .” (96)	Strong critique of Indian ways
7. I will deal with it by not dating or not telling them (239)	Imagines disobeying parents
8. We don’t want to disappoint parents. Would be worst thing in world (80)	Abrupt reversal.
9. You would forget that you’re American and have the right to date. Yes (30)	Indian identity dominates
10. Your parents do so much for you (88)	Macro—obligation to parents
11. I can do that (an arranged marriage). How could you make parents unhappy (80)	Accedes to arranged marriage
12. You gave me an instance where I would forget that I’m American. Wow (29)	Surprise

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate number of words in elaboration of meaning.

arranged marriage), she called upon the macro “obligation to parents” to narrate a solution of complete obedience to parents, including acceding to an arranged marriage. Thus, the topic led her to access a compartmentalized field of the dialogical self not in communication with the field accessed by Vignette 1.

This brings us to the second feature of a dialogical self illustrated here—shifting power relations between positions. I-as-Indian, not previously dominant with respect to arranged marriage, suddenly took over completely. The take over (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998) is especially striking given Yastha’s strongly voiced opposition to arranged marriage. The trigger for the “obligation to parents” macro and associated affect (evidenced by crying in the initial portion of the interview) seemed to be her imagined disobedience regarding dating. This talk (239 words) triggered such a strong “obligation” reaction that it overcame her objections to arranged marriage. This happened quite rapidly, and at the end of the discussion (Table 2, meaning 12) she seems surprised about what she has said.

Vignette 3

This vignette was similar to Vignette 1 in that it concerned issues of fitting into each culture, but it placed more emphasis on being treated differently because of language and appearance. Yastha’s summary of the vignette mentioned identity problems, not knowing where they belong, and “It’s almost like they belong to two cultures, but yet neither culture wants them or neither will embrace them. They feel isolated and feel left out... they’re confused about whether they’re Indian or American.” When asked whether she had experienced such a situation, she vacillated, “No. Not really. I mean, I do, and actually I think I do.”

As in the discussion of Vignette 1, the rapid shifting of positions and abrupt emergence of a “both” position (Table 3, meaning 8) is evident here. There was no carryover of the dominant I-as-Indian position from Vignette 2, further substantiating the context specificity of dialogical meaning making. However, there is some indication of carryover from Vignette 1, even though this is not acknowledged by Yastha (she never referred to Vignette 1 in this discussion). First, she narrated the same definition of “both” for each vignette—we can pick and choose—guided by the same macro organizer, freedom to choose. Second, this definition occurred earlier in the Vignette 3 discussion (Table 3, meaning 8) than it did in Vignette 1 (Table 1, meanings 12, 14). Thus, having stated the position for the first time, in conjunction with Vignette 1, she was able to come back to it more quickly in her narration of Vignette 3.

Yastha interpreted Vignette 3 as an illustration of not being embraced (her word) by either culture. She pursued the possibility of changing people’s attitudes in her discussion, first pessimistically (Table 3, meaning 6),

Table 3. Yastha's Discussion of Vignette 3

Yastha's sequential narration (paraphrased)	Commentary
1. Neither culture will embrace them. They're confused (69)	Attributing confusion to vignette
2. I'm seen as different by both cultures (258)	I as neither
3. Confusion. "Am I American or am I Indian?" (36)	Self-questioning
4. How Asian Indians are seen as different in America (150)	I as not American
5. "How do you make both people happy?" You're not either (114)	Acceptance from neither
6. " You can't change what other people think" (63)	Helpless to change others
7. You can embrace the things you like in both (44)	But you can change yourself
8. " We're in the perfect position. We get to pick and choose . . ." (34)	Abrupt switch to positive Macro—freedom to choose
9. If one doesn't like you , you can find acceptance with the other (46)	Switch from neither to one or other Macro—someone out there will accept you
10. I can make them realize I fit in each (141)	Reverses 6—can change others
11. " I mean, I don't know what to do" (0)	Return to helplessness
12. I do not forget that I am Indian. I will not forget that I'm American (57)	Taking action to change self
13. " I think, I think I'm both . . . I think we're both" (0)	Restating the "both" position from Vig. I
14. Would acknowledge both 'cause I'm going to be different (90)	Causal linking of different and both
15. You can do both (0)	Reinforcement of "both" through self action
16. We're able to do it every single day (113)	Evidence from experience that it's possible Macro: accepted as Indian and American

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate number of words in elaboration of meaning.

then with optimism (10), then again pessimistically, voicing helplessness (11). But perhaps with the support of the agentic macro, freedom to choose (7, 8), she was able to switch from the unviable (as she sees it) solution of changing other people to changing herself (12), which facilitated a "both" position statement—"I think, I think I'm both. I think that's what happens. I think we're both" (13).

It is at this point that she took a step toward higher-level organization of the I-as-both position when she said (meaning 14): "Like, I think I would acknowledge the fact that I'm Indian but I'm, also acknowledge [*sic*] the

fact that I'm American' cause I'm going to be different." (She then went on to talk about how she's not going to forget that she's Indian or that she's American, and she's going to do both traditions.) In this statement she causally connected being different with acknowledging both—*because she is different, she will acknowledge both*. Thus, at least for this moment, I-as-different (from both cultures) and I-as-both, previously oppositional I-positions in her narration, became partners in the organization of her dialogical self.

Her last two meaning statements also are significant for the emerging "both" position. She first reinforced the concept of both (Table 3, meaning 15), and then said, "That's what we do every single day, and we're able to do it" (16). In support of this statement, she gave evidence of being accepted by both cultures. Within the Indian culture, her parents accept her: "They have to. They gave birth to us, and [laughs] they do." And then, "for the most part American society thinks you're American. I mean, I have different skin but I speak the same language they do. I go to the same schools they do, and do many similar things that they do." Thus, speaking from the emergent I-as-both position, Yastha found evidence for acceptance from both cultures in her everyday experiences, where previously she had found experiential evidence for lack of acceptance by either (meanings 2–4). This demonstrates how a new I-position can begin to gain substance, supported in this instance by a shift from the macro organizer "someone in one culture or the other will accept you" (9), to "both will accept you" (16).

Review of system processes

Yastha's narration demonstrates how organization and variability work together in the dialogical self, and how they are both integral to identity creation. Organization within Yastha's self system was apparent at multiple levels. At the ontogenetic level, she initially narrated an identity story, I-as-Indian, which had been "her story" ever since an exploratory period in adolescence.² Like Dien's (2000), Yastha's story was comprehensive and coherent (albeit a different type of story than Dien's), and its constraint upon variability—her exploration of other identity positions—was evident in the first portion of the interview in that it "drew her" back repeatedly, after every exploratory foray. Existing identity stories dynamically maintain system stability by constraining proliferation of identity positions, and at times can be so dominant as to prevent exploration altogether (monologization; Cunha, 2007; Valsiner, 2002).

In the vignette section of the interview, hierarchical organization was evident in Yastha's use of generalized meanings, macro organizers (Duarte et al., 2006; Valsiner, 2005). One of these generalized meanings, obligation to parents, was central to her organization of I-as-Indian and guided a complete dominance of this position in the context of dating and marriage (Vignette 2). Other generalized meanings supported exploration of alternative I-positions (freedom to choose), and the development of the I-as-both position (people in both cultures accept you).

At the end of her discussion of Vignette 3, there was indication of an initial organization of the emerging I-as-both system. I-as-different from each culture, and I-as-both, previously contradictory in Yastha's narration, were causally connected. Thus, at this point, Yastha is not just restating the new I-as-both position, but she is in some way synthesizing it with I-as-different. This emergent synthesis was bolstered by evidence from her own experience (we are accepted by both everyday), even though her own experience had also been drawn upon, just a few minutes before, to support lack of acceptance by either culture. This demonstrates how emerging reorganization of the dialogical self system: (a) like the initial statement of a new I-position, can be abrupt and unpredictable; (b) is not governed by logical consistency (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998); and (c) is not necessarily a system-wide phenomena (see more about this below).

This leads to the importance of variability, emphasized by Ewing (1990), as integral to the dialogical self and as essential for system reorganization. Yastha's initial I-as-Indian organization constrained her exploration, but not completely. During the first part of the interview, she was able to narrate I-as-not-Indian, particularly on the topic of arranged marriage. Her narration of I-as-American was minimal at this point but was further explored in the vignette section of the interview. Without variability, the development of the I-as-not-Indian field, the I-as-both position would not have emerged, even with the scaffolding provided by the vignettes.

Discourse analysts emphasize contextual variation, particularly the shifts that occur in positioning from moment to moment with shifting frames of reference. This sort of shifting occurs in conversational contexts all the time and has no necessary relevance for longer-term development. But during identity narration, as in our interview, variability can signal disorganization of the existing system (in Yastha's case, the I-as-Indian system), paving the way for emergence of a new position. As demonstrated in her vignette discussions, rapid shifting of positions preceded emergence of a new position, and these emergences were abrupt (phase shifts, in dynamic systems language, Lewis & Douglas, 1998).

Shifting frames of reference matter in another way, as we saw in Yastha's discussion of Vignette 2. Her narration of romantic relationships accessed the macro organizer, obligation to parents, which immediately became so dominant that, despite her strong objections, she "gave in" to her parents regarding an arranged marriage. Yet this topic constituted a subsystem of her dialogical self that seemed uninfluenced by, and that did not in turn influence, the subsystem that permitted emergence of I-as-both in her discussions of Vignettes 1 and 3.

The interchange between existing organization and situational processes is circular (Lewis, 2002; Witherington, 2007). Yastha's current dialogical self constrained her narration, and in turn, the shifts in organization during the interview have potential implications for her future identity story. Once a new position has been narrated, it is more readily available to the system in the future (Lewis & Ferrari, 2001). We noted this in the carryover from Vignette 1

to Vignette 3: The final definition of “both” in Vignette 1, guided by the macro freedom to choose, was her first definition of “both” in the discussion of Vignette 3. We cannot say, of course, whether this new I-position will be maintained in any way by Yastha. At the time of the interview, she had little support for it in that she was, by choice, encapsulated within the Indian community. For the most part, she seemed quite content with her dominant I-as-Indian position (although like the Turkish adolescents studied by Aveling and Gillespie, 2008, implicit hybridization is evident, e.g., in her music preferences and certain beliefs that diverge from “traditional” Indian ways). Her emergent self-identification of I-as-both may well remain dormant unless new conflicts arise for her in the future.

Finally, our interview was designed to access dialogical self processes, so it called for self-reflection, and it scaffolded exploration of non-dominant positions. This undoubtedly encouraged Yastha’s exploration and facilitated the emergence of her “both” identity position. However, the demand characteristics of the situation and the interview questions did not inevitably lead to narratives of exploration and emergence. Another student, interviewed in the same way, held firm to his initial identity position throughout. Thus, Yastha apparently had a readiness, for whatever reason, to engage in exploration. An interview situation of this sort is certainly not the same as everyday interactions with family, friends, and others. But it is our assumption (and the assumption of others, e.g., Cunha, 2007; Duarte et al., 2006) that this kind of interview provides a window on ongoing processes of dialogical self-creation relevant for understanding Shamim’s brief and highly variable conversation (Ewing, 1990) as well as Dien’s (2000) life story.

Appendix: The vignettes

Vignette 1

As a second-generation Asian Indian I have to be “Americanized,” or else I am not cool enough for other members of my generation. . . I have to be ‘proper Indian’ for my parents and my community. I have to prove that I am American when asked ignorant questions from the White society such as “where did you learn to speak English so well?” When I travel to India, I can’t ignore the problems like corruption, gender discrimination, and violence; yet, in America, I am forced to be an ambassador from India.

Vignette 2

I am a second-generation Indian American. Somehow, I could not reconcile my sexual desirability in the face of white standards. This conflict was amplified by my inability to discuss with my parents. They did not prevent me from bringing up sexuality. Yet, for some reason, I believed that sexual curiosity, desire, and interest

were somehow “weak,” “too American,” and too antithetical to what my parents wanted of me: academic and intellectual achievement. Even though I’ve often yearned to share with them my personal romantic feelings, conflicts, and questions, I am distinctly aware that to do so would embarrass us both. And so, in my mind, my romantic life continues to be at odds with my family and culture. Since my parents are my only true link to India, not being able to include them in my romantic decision making also means not being able to fully incorporate my Indian self into my sexual self.

Note: Vignette 2 had an additional three sentences at the beginning about not sharing racist incidents with parents, but Yastha responded only to the portion included here.

Vignette 3

As a second-generation Asian Indian, despite being born in a Midwestern state of USA, and having attended one of best schools in the country, I have been treated differently on several occasions. At work, people try to speak to me really loud, often ask me to repeat my sentences as if they do not understand my accent. Sometimes it is very hurtful... I question myself why do I have to look different if I was born here... people in India perceive me differently, laugh when I speak my language and talk about Indian heritage... All this has made me feel stifled and constrained.

Notes

1. Interview questions are available from the first author.
2. Because this is a microgenetic analysis of a single interview, not an analysis extending over months or years, we can only infer from the initial interview content that Yastha entered the interview with a strong I-as-Indian developmental-level identity position. We believe this is a reasonable inference, given the initial interview content, but we are well aware of the importance of longer-term studies when questions concern relations among analytic levels.

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