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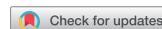
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Composing the Self: Toward the Dialogical Reconstruction of Self-Identity

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Composition work is an artistic method of work with identity and emotions, used in therapy, counseling, coaching, and training. Practiced in the context of constructivist counseling and grounded in dialogical self theory, it involves representation of a community of self or *I-positions* reflecting different aspects of one's identity through the use of small stones and other natural objects in a way that depicts their dynamic relation to one another. In this article, we illustrate a step-by-step implementation of this procedure to explore tensions and supportive relationships between these positions (e.g., I as Bohemian, I as angry, I as loser), as well as possibilities for their transformation. We begin with a brief description of the theoretical and practical warrant for the method, and then provide specific instructions that permit counselors working in many different settings to facilitate composition work with their clients, before offering a short case study featuring a man who drew on the procedure to reconstruct his view of important relational and emotional aspects of his identity as he faced both personal and professional transitions. We close by noting the flexibility of composition work in individual and group counseling, as well as in related domains such as life coaching and career counseling, and suggest some possible extensions of the method for use in these applications.

Composition work (Konopka & van Beers, 2014; Hermans, 2014) is a method of art therapy/coaching based on dialogical self theory (DST; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) and practiced in the broader context of a constructivist perspective (Neimeyer, 2009). As originally conceived by Agnieszka Konopka and Hubert Hermans, the method focuses on the multiplicity of *I-positions*, understood as characters or parts of the self that emerge in the "landscape of mind." The purpose of this article is to provide an orientation to this novel counseling practice, to outline a 7-step procedure for facilitating its use with individuals or groups, and to illustrate its application in an actual case.

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THEORETICAL BASIS AND OTHER SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

DST depicts the self as the landscape of mind (Hermans, 2001) inhabited by a spatially organized multiplicity of I-positions involved in mutual interchange. I-positions are understood as characters, parts of the self, or patterns of energy that are distinguishable from and can relate to each other (e.g., I as anxious, I as artist, I as father) and create a society of mind (Hermans, 2003). Some I-positions can be more central, visible, and accessible, whereas others are hidden or not reachable. The self in DST can be seen as a dynamic whole in which I-positions are composed and recomposed in the mind space. The spatial metaphor invites one to think about processes that are happening in the self in a simultaneous rather than a sequential way. It suggests interconnections between aspects of the mindscape and allows them to be seen in a broader context.

Composition work is a creative way of working with the landscape of mind populated by the multiplicity of I-positions. It involves the identification of both *external* positions (e.g., my mother, nature) and *internal* positions (e.g., I as anxious, I as dreamer)—whether personal (e.g., I as creative), emotional (e.g., I as loving), or social positions (e.g., I as Catholic)—the client considers relevant to his or her sense of identity or self. These different “characters” can have quite diverse qualities and may enter various kinds of relations, constituting a “community of selves” (Mair, 2014). Metaphorically speaking, as in human society, members of the community of mind can engage in wars, revolutions, coalitions, or creative forms of cooperation. Some positions may dominate the whole landscape and turn it into their kingdom, whereas others may lose their power and become subordinated to these inner dictators. One can be dominated, for example, by his or her “hard worker” side, eclipsing all other positions, including those that could be developed. Alternatively, another person may be dominated by a voice of his or her mother in a way that silences his or her more authentic positions.

Exploring the *distribution of power* (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) across the positions facilitates insight into the organization of one’s sense of self and relation relevant to others. Becoming aware of the distribution of power among I-positions and giving attention and voice to positions that are less dominant but vital for a person can lead to a new distribution of power in the self, one that allows a greater variety of I-positions to express their qualities, permitting a more “democratic” organization of the self (Hermans, *in press*). Such reorganization of power can take the drastic form of a *dominance reversal* (Hermans, 1996). This happens when underlying or silenced positions suddenly take over the dominance from others. This may be experienced as an “inner revolution,” from which a new direction in life or work can result.

An important role in enhancing insight into the organization of the inner multiplicity of positions is provided by the *meta-position*, a kind of helicopter perspective. According to Hermans (2014), a meta-position has a unifying, executive, and liberating function. It creates an optimal distance from the variety of positions and provides an overarching view that allows awareness of several positions simultaneously as well as the exploration of their qualities and organization. Being able to take a meta-position toward one’s own positions contributes to the integration of identity. Making a composition of I-positions creates optimal conditions for taking a meta-position.

Some types of I-positions that are described in DST are especially important in the process of reconstructing and developing self-identity. One such role in the process of change can be provided by the *promoter position* (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Valsiner, 2004), which integrates a variety of new and existing positions. A therapist can serve as an external promoter

position contributing to development of an internal promoter position—for example, “I as accepting” or “I as compassionate.” The promoter position has a central place in the repertoire and has the capacity to reorganize the self toward a higher level of development. It acts as a source for new positions and as an innovator for the self. In composition work, special attention may also need to be given to *shadow positions* (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). These rejected parts of the self are potential sources of energy and may add to a stronger sense of integration and completeness—if they are accepted and allowed.

Composition work is also inspired by the contemplative-aesthetic tradition of Japanese rock gardens (Konopka & van Beers, 2014). This corresponds with the basic metaphor of the landscape and multiplicity of mind in DST. Japanese rock gardens are also sometimes called “mindscapes” (Nitschke, 1999). Some of them are known to represent the inner landscape of mind and its dynamic development. These gardens can be seen as rich, insight-provoking, and transformative artistic representations of the self. Gardens like Ryoan-jin and Daisen-in in Kyoto, Japan, symbolize the basic dimensions of the self—namely, multiplicity and unity. They also show the challenges for the self, including dealing with opposites, inner conflicts, crises, uncertainty, and finding a direction in one’s development.

RECOMPOSING THE SELF IN COMPOSITION WORK

Composition work is a dynamic process of symbolizing I-positions in nonverbal forms (using stones and other small natural objects such as seeds or twigs) and externalizing them, positioning and repositioning them in a space as an artistic composition. Engaged in this way, compositions can be explored in terms of separate elements, their relations, and the overall patterns they create. In addition to talking about the arrangement of elements, each position can be further differentiated and investigated by *voicing* it (literally articulating aloud, “What would this position have to say for itself?”); *exploring a need* related to this position (“What does it need?”); or expressing its emotional quality (“How does it feel?”). Attending to the relations between elements, one can further explore what is happening between two or more positions (e.g., where some form of conflict, cooperation, or a blockage exists within the self). The composition can be also investigated as a whole, in terms of the pattern it creates. (e.g., a sense of chaos or split) that can reveal something important about the current organization of one’s self. In arriving at a final composition, symbolic movements in the form of placing stones, composing them, exploring them, and recomposing them reflects—as well as facilitates—the dynamic, spatial process of constructing and reconstructing one’s self-identity.

Externalization and Taking a Meta-Position

An important process related to the movement in space characteristic of composition work is externalization. This practice has been used in a verbal version in the context of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), as well as in constructivist therapy, to give place, form, and voice to an externalized position such as one’s mother or one’s grief for her in the context of grief therapy (Neimeyer & Hooghe, *in press*). In composition work, externalization takes on a highly nonverbal form, in which personal experience is symbolized in the concrete composition, placed “out there”

in front of the client (the maker or “composer”). Any aspect of the self—such as anger, fear, or “I as Bohemian”—is symbolized by the client by choosing a fitting stone or other figurative object and placing it in on a table top, often on a white sheet of paper that permits the client to add lines suggesting clusters, coalitions, bridges, barriers, and directions of movement or action in further elaborating the composition. Just as a picture can express a thousand words, an emerging landscape can express feelings, emotions, tensions, and issues that previously had no verbal language (Harris, 2012). Such an externalized inner landscape “speaks back” in the nonverbal language of space, colors, shapes, and forms. These aspects give important information about qualities of I-positions, their relations, and the overall organization of the self that is revealed in the created pattern. Externalization of I-positions in the form of a composition creates optimal conditions in which the composer can take a meta-position, rendering a larger perspective. Any emotion a person feels or position he or she takes can only fully be understood in the broader context of other aspects of the self, not as an isolated element. The method creates such a context by combining and relating all elements simultaneously. Externalization helps to explore the meaning of an I-position or emotion in the broader context of the pattern formed by the position repertoire of the person creating it. Externalization also stimulates an optimal distance that enlarges one’s space of freedom toward what is observed and supports one’s agency toward problematic emotions and aspects of the self.

Recomposing the Self as Art

The constructivist perspective states that the human mind is an active agent in structuring experience and identity (Neimeyer, 1995). In composition work, this aspect comes to the fore in the creative act of composing one’s inner world in a symbolic form as well as in its further differentiation through the pictorial language of natural metaphors. This artful way of constructing one’s identity can have transforming and enriching potential. When the self is composed in this way as a work of art it may reveal qualities that are not accessible via more practical language and means. One’s inner world translated into this form of art can potentially reveal its intrinsic artistry. If a composition of one’s inner world can be experienced in an artful way, it may help the client see totality in the broken pieces. Just as the depth of poetry does not depend on its positive and pleasant tone, the artistry of experience can move beyond the dichotomy of positive and negative to a deeper, more encompassing level. The power of poetics (Neimeyer, 2009) that in Kelly’s (1977) perspective transcends the obvious can be a source of transformation in the therapeutic process. The process of making a composition involves both nonverbal and verbal creativity. A composition of stones can be seen as a form of abstract art speaking through its pattern, structures, and colors.

The further exploration of a composition involves the pictorial language offered by the basic metaphor: a landscape of mind. Landscape of mind, a concept that appears both in DST and in Japanese gardens, is an evocative metaphor that can facilitate the exploration of the inner world. The richness of geographical images—words like *volcano* or *storm*, *flora* and *fauna*—offer the possibility of using a pictorial poetic language. These metaphors go beyond objectively descriptive language and invite both counselor and client to “speak poetically, rather than prosaically for maximum impact” (Neimeyer, 2012, p. 8). Thus, they relate to a side of the self that goes beyond the rational and logical to reach what Huxley (1956) called “the antipodes of mind” that extend

beyond the system of conceptual thought. Geographical metaphors can also express the essential otherness of the mind's continents and the relative autonomy of their inhabitants, which reflect the relative autonomy and otherness of I-positions in the self.

Dynamic Embodied Process of Positioning

An I-position is neither a static entity nor a concept about one's self. It is, rather, a dynamic and embodied process of positioning that has a spatial character. One takes a position toward somebody/something or toward an emotion, which is often related with an embodied movement in real or mental space (e.g., approaching or distancing, expanding or constricting). The dynamic process of positioning and repositioning is depicted in composition work in movements of elements, their sensed tendency to shift in a particular direction, their qualities and spatial relations. The forms of stones are also helpful in expressing how parts of our selves are positioned toward each other or toward external positions (e.g., my friend). Not only *where* a stone or a group of stones is placed but also *where it is directed* (e.g., to the outside or inside, forward or backward) and *how it is directed* (e.g., with a sharp end pointing toward, with a heavy force bearing down) can be subjects of further inquiry. This kind of exploration can give important insights into the dynamic arrangement of forces that play a role in the theater of mind. Introducing movement in composition work allows the client to explore further this dynamic process of positioning and repositioning and to experiment with new ways of positioning. Change in the location of stones (e.g., bringing two stones closer) can create a change in experience and evoke new feelings that may carry important messages about possibilities of self-reconstruction. Apparently, allowing different ways of positioning in this symbolic space, by making new movements, also inspires new movements in the mental space. In this way composition work can become a process of recomposing and reorganizing the self.

Recomposing the Relation with One's Emotions

Emotions can be seen as the most dynamic, temporary ways of positioning the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). They are foundational in the construction of the self and key determinants of self-organization (Greenberg, 2002). "Following the affect trail" is a guiding principle for therapy in the constructivist perspective (Neimeyer, 2009). Taking this into account, emotions may receive special attention in the process of composition work.

The term *emotion* comes from the Latin term *e-movere*, which can be understood as a movement or migration from ("out of") one place to another. Not only the quality of this movement but also how it is responded to have great influence on the organization and development of the self. An inner movement created by an emotion in the self may be responded to in numerous ways. Just as one move in a dance can be followed by further steps, the motion in the self created by affect is part of a choreography of movements within the multiplicity of the self. Sensing a wave of feeling, one can follow it, surrender to its movement, or make a counter movement blocking it, depending on the position from which one relates to this emotion. The character of this emotional relation can be captured in this "answering movement," in which one positions oneself toward the emotion. According to the dialogical view on

emotions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), the bidirectional dynamic relation between emotion and the self includes both the impact the emotion has on the self and how a person relates to it.

In composition work, one's relation with an emotion is often symbolized in the way one places a stone representing the emotion: how it is placed on the mat (e.g., with a powerful or weak movement), where it is situated (e.g., in the heart of composition or at the outskirts), and its position (e.g., turned toward or away from oneself). This can be further explored by mapping the influence the emotion has on other positions, and vice versa. This relation also can be investigated by accessing the felt impulse in an emotion (its tendency to move down, closer, etc.) and toward the emotion (e.g., an impulse to remove its symbolizing stone from the composition). One of our clients followed such an impulse and smashed a black stone representing sadness using another stone. By doing so, he became aware of the intensity of anger toward his sadness. Becoming aware of the way we position ourselves toward an emotion through the movement we make (e.g., "How am I holding back my anger?" or "How am I distancing myself from my sadness?") is an important step in transforming the relation with one's emotion into a more beneficial one. Shifting a stone in a composition allows the composer to experiment in a symbolic way with a new relation with his or her feelings. A client who placed a stone representing anger on the periphery of her composition tried to sense the impulse of this position and then placed it in the center of her composition, which gave her a feeling of relief and a sense of being more herself. This symbolic movement represented the inner movement of allowing and accepting her own anger as an important part of herself.

Voicing I-Positions in Composition Work

I-positions in composition work can be voiced so that a person is able to express directly his or her experiences from a distinct part of the self. Giving a voice to an I-position allows one to know it from within (Rowan, 2010) and helps one to access and assimilate the effects related to the position. "Speaking from within" a position, in contrast to a detached way of "speaking about it," dramatizes and intensifies the experience, which, according to the constructivist perspective, is crucial for any therapeutic change (Neimeyer, 2009). In composition work, we invite people to give voice to positions, which stimulates discovering qualities that may be inaccessible in linear discourse. Jung used a similar procedure in his own process of self-discovery and therapy. While working on building a stone tower that represented himself, he was receptive to the messages of the stones he used in the construction. He "let the stone itself speak" (Jung, 1963, p. 227). One of his stones "said," "I am an orphan, alone; nevertheless I am found everywhere. ... In woods and mountains I roam, but I am hidden in the innermost soul of man" (p. 227). The voices given by the stones became, for Jung, sources of wisdom and integration, as for him they spoke the messages of his unconscious: "I need not have written any books; it is all on the stone," he said, finishing his orphan stone and placing it as monument in front of his stone tower (in Oakes, 1987, p. 88). In a similar way, in composition work we invite people to give voice to a symbolized position and possibly access, express, and hear the voices that are not otherwise communicated. The following seven steps convey this procedure systematically, in a way that can be read to a client or group to provide guidelines for composing, exploring, and processing the exercise.

COMPOSING THE SELF

As an artful means of exploring the community of self, composition work involves selecting a set of small stones or other natural objects to depict different I-positions, in the language of DST, understood as currently significant roles (I as a professional, daughter, lover, rebel), identities (I as a woman, a child, a spiritual seeker), emotional states (I as anxious, ambitious, critical, strong), or even external positions (my mother, my supervisor, my partner, God) that play vital parts in the theater of our lives. The technique involves seven steps, any of which can be flexibly adapted by the user or therapist.

Selecting the Stones

From a large set of 30 or more stones (per participant), select approximately 10 that represent important I-positions within your personal community of self. You might first bring these to mind by listing them, perhaps following a few minutes of mindful meditation on questions like, “Who am I?” and “Who else might be there?” Alternatively, hold these questions in mind as your hand hovers over the stones, allowing it to reach out and select spontaneously those that speak to you in some way. Then ask yourself, “Who do we have here?”

Placing the Stones

On a blank sheet of paper, slowly place the stones in a way that conveys their relationship to one another. For example, the proximity of two stones might represent the psychological closeness of two positions, or the placement of one stone vertically over another might represent relations of dominance and subjugation. You can also draw lines on the paper to represent conflict, opposition, or inclusion between particular stones or clusters.

Labeling the Stones

Next to each stone, write the name of the position it represents (people pleaser, sensualist). Some of these names might be conventional (my father, I as student), whereas others might be idiosyncratic (the good scout, the artist). Photograph this image.

Exploring the Composition

What draws attention as you examine the composition as a whole? Are parts of it static? Dynamic? If there were a direction of movement, what would it be? Are there blockages, oppositions, or conflicts among the stones? Which of the positions is most powerful? Most vulnerable? What alliances exist among them? If an earthquake occurred in this space, where would it happen and what would be its effects? Consider recording this, or having a colleague or therapist simply ask the questions and note down your answers.

Voicing the Positions

Choose one stone you are drawn to and pick it up, become it, and speak for it. Answer questions like these: “Who are you?” “When did you become a part of [*your name*]?” “What message do you carry, and for whose ears?” “What is your role in the community of self?” “What do you need?” “What do you want others to know?” Then choose another stone that wishes to speak, perhaps in response to the first one, and give it voice in a similar fashion. Continue until all that wish to speak have had their say. For the others, hold each briefly and try out words like, “I will hold my peace,” “I have no words,” or “I am the one who observes.” Revise these statements until each feels true. Record your reflections.

Shifting Positions

Ask yourself, “How must this change to feel more satisfactory?” or “How can I change this to become more who I really am?” Then let your fingers experiment with shifting some of the stones, without removing any, but adding one or more stones as needed. What would this new configuration bring into being that the previous one did not? What concrete actions in the world would support this change? Again, consider capturing your responses in an interview or a recorder.

Reflecting on the Work

Photograph the reorganized composition. Then journal about your observations of the exercise, using the recordings, interview notes, or photographs to refresh your memory as you think creatively about its meanings.

A CASE ILLUSTRATION

Jared was a man in his early 30s who was undergoing profound transitions of both a personal and professional sort, leaving a once-committed relationship that had become dispiriting and degrading and preparing to transition to a new stage of his career that would entail both geographic and vocational challenges as well as opportunities. He readily engaged in composition work as a means of exploring his community of self, alongside a counselor whom he had come to trust. The following reflections are Jared’s own, recorded in his personal journal after the exercise.

I found the idea a little strange at first, like no way is this going to get inside my head. I picked the following words to explore: I as anger, I as Bohemian, I as square, I as fear, I as confident, I as loser, I as dying, I as growing. I picked most of the stones with these words in mind, but a few just because they seemed interesting. For example, all of my items were stone or calcium or some sort of mineral, except for the objects representing loser and dying—loser was a tiny bit of tree bark, and dying was a eucalyptus seed, both organic materials. Neither of the latter was picked for this purpose.



FIGURE 1 Exploring I-positions using composition work.

I thought I might have a hard time diving into myself and uncovering implicit patterns and meaning, but this was not the case at all. I almost felt like I was speaking in tongues once the exercise started—as if I wasn't totally in control of the words coming out of me, but at the same time they were coming from a very deep and genuine place, and it felt like a very safe way to explore (thanks in no small part to the therapist, I'm sure!).

I intuitively and quickly arranged my objects into a sort of arrow moving forward (see [Figure 1](#)). The large glass marble representing I as Bohemian was at the very center, with loser in its shadow. The small piece of orange glass that was square was right ahead of Bohemian, with a calcium corkscrew worm casting leading ahead from the square as growth.

To either side of growth was confident—a large, smooth, beautiful piece of quartz crystal—and fear—a tiny snail shell smaller than a pea. Behind Bohemian was death.

Anger is one of the most difficult and confusing emotions in life for me—I often don't know what to do with it, and here was no different. I decided immediately to just drop the glass shard randomly, but it fell squarely in the path of what seemed to be the forward momentum of all the other selves (spooky!), so I gave myself permission to do another random drop, and I was more satisfied with where it landed.



FIGURE 2 Processing composition work with the counselor.

Once given a pen to diagram relationships between selves on the paper beneath my composition, I made a large arrow pointing forward, which felt like a spaceship or an F1 racing car moving forward. At this point, I reflected with the counselor on my life right now, and all the changes and transformations I'm going through (see [Figure 2](#)).

It was really satisfying to have a material representation of that in front of me, to a degree that I wasn't expecting. I absolutely do not want to call it concrete. That feels like the wrong process, but I'm not sure what the process is. It felt dynamic, and so when I was instructed to reconfigure, it was very welcome. My reconfiguration was very simple, and it felt incredibly powerful. I moved anger from "cast to the side" to the "bow of the ship," with the sharp end pointing forward, leading the entire vessel. I provided my therapist with the imagery of an Arctic icebreaker ship, which, instead of getting stuck in the ice (reactive anger), very efficiently pushes ice to the side and allows for forward motion (adaptive assertiveness). This was great. Instead of anger being something that holds my Bohemian core back when reacting with authority figures, it became a tool to cut through the crap in an efficient, purposeful manner. I've thought about it in my personal life more than once since we did the exercise!

COMMENTARY ON THE COMPOSITION IN THE CASE STUDY

Giving Voice to a Symbolized I-Position

Jared, in contrast to his expectations, found it easy to voice his symbolized positions: "I almost felt like I was speaking in tongues ... as if I wasn't totally in control of the words coming out of me, but at the same time they were coming from a very deep and genuine place." This suggests that voices attributed to the stones were coming from different than habitual or usual positions and in this way could serve as sources of innovative new meanings. As in Jung's own process, stones seemed to help Jared connect and to give a voice to an unspeakable, less conscious level of the

self. One's deepest meanings as well new possibilities for reconstructing one's life and identity are usually elusive and ask for expression in figurative rather than literal forms (Neimeyer, 2010). In this way composition work offers a nonverbal figurative language that can facilitate expression of these partly unknown aspects of experience. This figurative vocabulary may act as a bridge between the unspeakable and speakable.

Introducing figurative, natural materials can invite more poetic, artistic, and metaphorical modes of expression. Jared used metaphorical language that helped him to grasp deeper meanings and express the unique character of his positions:

The small piece of orange glass that was square was right ahead of Bohemian, with a calcium corkscrew worm casting leading ahead from the square as growth. To either side of growth was confident—a large, smooth, beautiful piece of quartz crystal—and fear—a tiny snail shell smaller than a pea. Behind Bohemian was death.

Composing and Recomposing: The Dynamism of a Composition

An intuitive way of arranging symbols and diagramming their interrelations revealed a pattern that Jared considered significant, “like a spaceship or an F1 racing car moving forward.” This reflected an organization of I-positions that revealed something important about where he stood at this point in his life. For Jared, the emergent pattern was not a fixed configuration but, rather, a dynamic, living totality:

It was really satisfying to have a material representation of that in front of me, to a degree that I wasn't expecting. I absolutely do not want to call it concrete. ... It felt dynamic, and so when I was instructed to reconfigure it, it was very welcome.

Jared experienced his composition as easily transformed and developed, which reflected and stimulated as sense of self as a process and invited him to explore possibilities of innovation and change. Experimenting with a new configuration showed a prospect of a vital new organization of I-positions. This illustrated that the symbolic act of reorganization is not simply an abstract act, but may have a strong experiential effect, as Jared noted: “My reconfiguration was very simple, and it felt incredibly powerful. I moved anger from cast to the side to the bow of the ship, with the sharp end pointing forward, leading the entire vessel.” Rearranging the composition helped him find new ways of relating to and using an important emotion (anger) by giving it a new place and meaning in the context of a broader I-position repertoire: “This was great. Instead of anger being something that holds my Bohemian core back when reacting with authority figures, it became a tool to cut through the crap in an efficient, purposeful manner.”

The meaning of anger had been metaphorically depicted and redefined in the context of a composition pattern: “I provided my therapist with the imagery of an Arctic icebreaker ship, which, instead of getting stuck in the ice (reactive anger), very efficiently pushes ice to the side and allows for forward motion (adaptive assertiveness).” Composition work, reflecting an inner complexity, helps the client to see each element in relation to other positions. In this way, the meaning of each position can be easily defined and redefined, as Jared experienced and articulated.

Micro-Movement

Composition work is not limited to exploration of relations between positions or patterns. Micro-movements, such as the way of placing or replacing a symbolized emotion/position, can equally easily be used to explore a relation one has with this emotion/position. For Jared, the movement of placing a stone reflected a relation he had with his anger: “Anger is one of the most difficult and confusing emotions in life for me—I often don’t know what to do with it, and here was no different. I decided immediately to just drop the glass shard randomly.” Jared’s subsequent composition work supported exploration and differentiation of his inner complexity of the self. It allowed him to work with this complexity in a dynamic way. Such dynamism was reflected and facilitated on a micro-level, a single movement in the positioning of anger, and on a macro-level as a forward movement within the overall pattern of internal relations in a way that stimulated the dialogical reconstruction of his self-identity.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

DST (Hermans, 2014) is animated not by the vision of a self that is singular, stable, and knowable but, rather, by a community of selves that is instead multiple, dynamic, and elusive, changing as different facets of identity come into contact with one another, as well as with other selves positioned in the external world. In keeping with this vision, composition work offers an artistic, analogical methodology for expressing and exploring one’s I-positions—those relevant facets of emotion and personal experience that in their totality scaffold an evolving sense of identity. Like other creative and reflective methods featured in constructivist psychotherapy and supervision (Guiffrida, 2014; Mahoney, 2006; Neimeyer, 2009; Neimeyer & Winter, 2006), it invites the client into the position of coinvestigator, composing and recomposing a repertoire of positions that personify an evolving self. Flexibility of the method allows for using it in a structured, step-wise way, as well as in a spontaneous process in which interventions emerge based on moment-to-moment interaction between a therapist/coach and a client. It can be applied in individual and in group work settings, and in counseling as well as in coaching practices (e.g., life coaching or career counseling), in which exploration and transformation of one’s inner complexity are relevant for the process of change and development. We hope this discussion, formalization, and illustration of composition work encourages other counselors to join us in this practice, offering their clients a powerful tool for reconstructing identity in a challenging world.

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