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# Portrait of a scientist: in conversation with Hubert Hermans, founder of Dialogical Self Theory<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This interview-based article about Hubert Hermans, founder of The Dialogical Self Theory (DST), was intended to determine the founder's personal relationship to the construction and development of his theory and to provide a portrait of the engaged scientist and vulnerable researcher at work. DST lends itself to interdisciplinary research and practice, and is used in diverse fields and contexts (e.g. psychotherapy; bereavement scholarship; higher education). However, little has been written about the founder of the theory. I embarked on this project to illuminate the researcher and theorist as an individual who taps into personal material for practical and conceptual learning, and to honour Hermans's contribution to the field of psychology, in the spirit of a Festschrift.

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## Introduction

Although science has the aim and aura of objectivity, the topics of research we come up with are often subjective and come from our own life questions. (Hermans, Interview 1, 2019)  
... most research is Me-Search. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 109)

Hubert Hermans,<sup>1</sup> co-founder and key developer of the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) is a highly successful research scientist with extensive publications and an international following. Indeed, Hermans still works actively in the ninth decade of life and is the picture of scholarly success and acumen.

Meeting him in person might have been intimidating, were it not for his gentle demeanour, playful mind, and his penchant for compelling self-reflexivity. This article aims to illuminate the more "personal" side of him and express a number of ways in which DST has informed his understanding of himself and life, including how he used himself as a guinea pig for experimenting and developing DST concepts. The writing here also intends to honour his contribution to the psychology of self and reveal more about the man to other researchers.

Our interviews took the form of several conceptually and affectively engaged dialogues. These conversations, which I recorded, also allowed me to explore the use of DST in research on grief and bereavement, as it applied to my own life circumstances. With this in mind, I propose and expand on the idea that as qualitative researchers we stand to gain from vulnerability, self-reflexive dialogues and practices, and that we can better understand ourselves and make meaning of our lived experience using DST principles. What I include about myself as a researcher

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\*This article was written with Hubert Hermans's permission: He has given his blessing to use all the material presented here, including our informal conversations and personal emails.

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is intended to further illuminate the value of Hermans's contribution and show how learning in conversation is a dialogical process.

## Background and context

Hubert and I met 10 years ago when my spouse Frans Meijers introduced us. Four of us were writing a book chapter for the *Handbook of the Dialogical Self Theory* (Hermans & Gieser, 2012) where we applied DST to careers research in educational contexts (Winters et al., 2012). This project introduced me to the theory, and I have continued to use it in most of my research since (Lengelle, 2014, 2021).

On a summer afternoon in the garden at Hermans's home in Milsbeek, The Netherlands, Hubert, Frans, Agnieszka (Hubert's wife at the time), and I had a spirited conversation over lunch. As a researcher and professor of writing for well-being, I shared that when running into personal issues, I wrote dialogues with a wiser self, which I referred to as "the cosmos", and gained insights that I felt transcended my limiting patterned responses. Using DST to frame his response, he delighted me by explaining that, "What you are doing is using an imaginary I-position outside yourself in order to break out of a particular ego I-prison that you were in around a personal issue".

What impressed me about this initial (and later other) conversation(s) was that Hubert would ask questions without radiating in any way that he was waiting for a reply which he could then correct, adjust, or verify. He was truly open. Over the years we have become colleagues and friends and worked on various publications and conferences together. In that time, I became increasingly interested in DST, especially how its principles might apply to writing-the-self practices and (self)concepts. In recent years, Hermans is also working on expanding definitions of democracy using DST (Hermans, 2018) which offers conceptual and practical innovations within global citizenship education. The applications for this in higher education are helping researchers to illuminate the importance of the internal dialogue and self-reflection in democratic processes (Lengelle et al., 2018).

In addition to the books and articles on DST that I read in those years, Hubert also gave Frans and me a copy of *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking* (Hermans, 2012) which I will be drawing on in this article. In that book, Hermans shows his vulnerability by reflecting on emotionally impactful experiences from his life and he uses DST as his frame for self-understanding. In our most recent conversations, near the completion of this article, he does the same in the context of grieving the loss of one of his brothers and how he is positioning himself during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since Hubert and my first meeting, several life-changing things have happened to me, as well as to Hubert. He divorced his wife Agnieszka, with whom he also worked, and my partner in life and work, Frans Meijers, died of cancer. Hubert and I spoke about these changes in both informal and theory-inspired ways while working on this project. Those conversations furthered my sense of the importance of the vulnerable researcher, as well as how biographical and autoethnographic explorations might lead to more insight and creative ways to respond to life's problems, including how to position one's self and reflect on identity in the face of loss (Lengelle, 2021).

Before explaining the chosen approach to this biographical project and describing and interpreting my findings, I will introduce DST. Readers unfamiliar with the theory will benefit from the explanation and it will set the stage for the analysis of the interviews as well.

## The theory: origins and first reflections

DST which was first presented in a joint article almost three decades ago (Hermans et al., 1992), was particularly inspired by the ideas of psychologist William James and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In the works of these scholars, Hermans noted expansive ideas of the "self" that psychology seemed to be missing hitherto. James described an *extended self* that included others and "made clear that the self is not located inside the skin but extended to the environment" (Hermans, 2012, p. 29). Indeed, James argued that not only are our thoughts and feelings a part of us but so are the people who influence us and who we internalise (e.g. mother, partner, rival). This is perhaps why

we may feel we are in conversation with writers we have never met (e.g. whose ideas compel us, but who were not alive in our lifetime). It may also explain how we can experience loved ones who have died as an inseparable “part of us”. Many people, in fact, report still “hearing” or “talking” to those who have died via an internal dialogue: the concept of continuing bonds in bereavement is well-established (see Lengelle, 2021; Neimeyer & Konopka, 2019).

What piqued Hermans’s interest as well, regarding Bakhtin’s work, was the idea of differing voices within the self. These voices are like characters in a novel that can talk to one another and seem like separate people; Bakhtin considered consciousness a polyphonic novel (Hermans, 2012). In stories, usually crafted by a single author, characters are created that are relatively autonomous; they are even capable of “disagreeing with the author, even rebelling against him” (p. 29) much like we experience this within ourselves.

The combination of these original ideas about the self, led to a conceptualisation of the dialogical self: the self as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind with differing voices that can speak to each other, interact creatively, and represent an extended self (for a full review see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In opposition to the Cartesian model of identity, DST posits that we are not a singular, individual self. The Cartesian definition of self is equated with the mind, separated from others, and separate from embodiment (Baker, 2011); DST does not imply such bifurcation. Rather, in DST, we can position and reposition in-relation to others which we do in an ongoing internal and external conversation, that includes emotions as I-positions of embodiment (e.g. the pain in my body is speaking to me about a need for rest).

In the DST’s conception of identity, the way in which we change can be explained as a dimension of positioning and repositioning. Our collection of sub-selves or what in DST is referred to as “I-positions”, position themselves (e.g. I-am-educated), reposition (e.g. but I need to expand my knowledge) and engage in counter-positioning (e.g. I am ignorant about a great many things). There is also the transcendent experience of de-positioning where “the de-positioning I is no longer attached to or influenced by any particular position but participates in a broader space of transcendental awareness which is often described in the literature as a mystical experience” (Hermans, 2012, pp. 33–34). This should not be confused with a meta position which represents the ability to observe various positions (i.e. take a helicopter view). Another key position described in the theory is the promoter position, which shows an openness towards the future, an ability to integrate other positions, and can “reorganize the self toward a higher level of development” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 228).

In speaking with Hermans about identity change and the self in the context of his divorce from his second wife, Agnieszka, and about the death in 2018 of my partner Frans, I could see that using the dialogical self to conceptualise changing positions in relationships forestalls a need for absolute truth or singular way of seeing “the other” or “one’s self” within experience. It is not necessary to be consistently identified with one aspect of experience, for instance to determine that “now that we are divorced, we will no longer be meaningful to each other”. Or, in my case, “now that my spouse is dead, further conversations with him are impossible”.

Hubert can conceptualise the change from “I-as-no-longer spouse” to “I as collaborator and valued friend” without cognitive dissonance. Albeit this loss did require an acknowledgement of distressing feelings and time to re-position. Hubert also had an existential experience in a church with powerful music following the break-up of his marriage that could be considered an incident of de-positioning (Interview 2, 2019). Yet, he did not need to consider himself incongruent or unusual in pursuing a friendship with his ex-wife after heartache, in the same way that I can continue a conversation with my deceased beloved without needing to be religious. These are specific examples of viewing the self as diverse and dialogical and shows how the theory is generative.

Indeed, Hermans maintains that a theory should be generative and asks these questions by extension, “does the theory create new ideas? What else can we see by looking through the lens of a particular theory?” (Interview 2, 2019). DST necessarily continues to evolve. Hermans says, “a theory that’s done is a dead theory; it must be open, one must be able to critique it, and others may

contribute to it" (Interview 2, 2019). As I reviewed my notes on these points, it struck me that those same things apply to the evolution of human identity: an identity that is "done" is a dead identity; in order to develop, we must be open, we can learn when willing to hear and work with critiques, and others contribute to our becoming. DST is used by many scholars in both practical and theoretical work and lends itself to evocative interdisciplinary research. It has been used to reflect on psychotherapeutic interventions, vocational psychology, grief interventions, cultural healing by narrative means, and to frame the psycho-diversity needed to support global citizenship education to name but a few areas of exploration.

In this frame, the aim of this article is fourfold: (1) to introduce the founder of the DST to readers and researchers in a way that sheds light on the human being behind the theory, (2) to honour Hubert's conceptual work and humanity by revealing his personal motivation for learning and developing DST, (3) to explore the proposition, through dialogue, that there is value in revealing the researcher as a vulnerable self-reflexive human being and (4) to enhance my own reflections on the application of DST as a (vulnerable) human and researcher of bereavement.

### **Methodological considerations**

This article is a hybrid of an interview as an artistic portrait in the spirit of a festschrift as well as a scholarly research project, using semi-structured interviews. It is a qualitative work, suited "to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant" (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). The process was a dialogical co-creation – a "tango" (Hubert's analogy for dialogue); the dance involved I-positions like writer, organiser of ideas, inspired creator, researcher, and friend who took turns in bringing together stories, concepts, feelings, and snippets of conversation.

When drafting the work, I followed an intuitive process of moving between various I-positions, using DST as my theoretical frame. I also used thematic analysis within a grounded theory approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing themes to emerge, with only a single starting point: the intention to show the human face of Hermans as researcher and theorist. Several of the themes that ultimately emerged from the interviews and the analysis were: (childhood) pain as a personal driver of career, tensions and third positions, DST as reflexive learning for its founder, maturing as a researcher, and lessons to pass on. These themes are discussed in detail in subsequent sections.

In October 2019, starting on Hubert's 82nd birthday, I had the good fortune of spending three days with him on a conference trip. We travelled together from Amsterdam to Birmingham, where we were invited as keynote speakers for a British career conference. In our downtime, we had many conversations, three of which were semi-structured interviews where I began with prepared questions and let our conversation evolve from there. I recorded three interviews, the first of which was 35 minutes, the second 57 minutes, and the third 90 minutes. We also had informal conversations as we travelled that have influenced the content and the mood of this work.

Working with and making an analysis of this qualitative data was a cyclical undertaking involving "inferential processes ... drawing forth meaning via researcher's reflection data about what is important ... formulating an approximation of inherent meaning ... deciding that further analysis could provide useful evidence ... seeking out commonalities after adding new data to the set under consideration ..." (Rennie quoted in Levitt et al., 2017, p. 8). As I listened to the recorded interviews, I carried my laptop through my house, dusting walls and wiping floors as I did so. This seems a rather idiosyncratic detail, but I mention it to show a sense of literal positioning and repositioning. The movement of my physical body into the open spaces of my light-filled home created corresponding space inside me to listen more fully and to (re)position myself. At one point in the process, I smiled in recognition as I heard Hubert talk about his need to walk outside in order to expand the space inside himself. There he also encounters objects in the world that become metaphors for his conceptual thinking. For instance, he describes how he happens upon "a large 500,000-year-old rock with fresh, but already wilting flowers laid on top of it" (Interview 1, 2019).

He tells me about his awareness of the impermanence of life and shares a memory of when he was a young researcher. He remembered older established scholars at a table speaking about how their writing work in part represented their desire for immortality.

In addition to (re)listening to the interviews and transcribing parts of them, I referenced a number of Hermans's previous books, I looked at his website, searched in the library database for articles I had not yet seen, remembered moments over the years of knowing Hubert, and thought about the ways in which Frans and I have used the dialogical self in our learning and writing. In my methodological reflections, I aimed for what Levitt and colleagues call, "methodological integrity", within which they, "... distinguish two constituents, fidelity and utility" (2017, p. 9). Fidelity emphasizes the close "connection that researchers can obtain with the phenomenon under study" (p. 10) in order to, "... seek to develop results that are rich and encompassing" (p. 11). Utility "refers to the effectiveness of the research design and methods, and their synergistic relationship, in achieving study goals ..." (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 10). The format of dialogue-based interviews, recorded for later reference, and reference to other sources met the goal of utility, while my collegial friendship with Hubert and my ability to navigate the language of narrative psychology in both English and Dutch represents the potential for research fidelity.

## The intention of the research

### *The vulnerable researcher*

Our pre-occupations become our occupations. Mark Savickas (as cited in Vess & Lara, 2016, p. 88)

The days when researchers maintained a strict persona of "objective scientist" have eased in past decades and I posit that this shift has contributed to the humanisation of knowledge in the social sciences. It is becoming more accepted to write about one's lived experience, for instance, in explaining one's vocational choices (Savickas, 1997, 2012), one's research interests (Van der Kolk, 2014; Wolynn, 2017), and the importance of one's emotions in learning (Nussbaum, 2001).

Pioneering researchers, like Carolyn Ellis, author of *Final Negotiations* (1995), wrote a daring auto-ethnographic memoir of her life with her ill and dying partner, thereby breaking new ground in sociology, ethnography, and grief studies. Communications scholar Art Bochner, wrote a personal narrative about the impact of his father's death, questioning the academic handling of grief and bridging his scholarly work in personal and impacting ways (1997). Grief scholar, Robert Neimeyer, openly tells and writes about his father's suicide when he was a boy just shy of 12 to explain his choice of work (James, 2015). English composition professor and proponent of disclosure writing, Jeffrey Berman, writes about the painful death of his wife by cancer in order to share and illustrate the value of courageous writing with his English composition students, while also helping himself (Berman, 2012).

Perhaps the most well-known researcher who divulges her fears of vulnerability and the importance of it in our personal *and* scholarly learning is Brené Brown (2012) who, in studying shame and vulnerability, recounts,

This new information created a major dilemma for me personally: On the one hand, how can you talk about the importance of vulnerability in an honest and meaningful way without being vulnerable? On the other hand, how can you be vulnerable without sacrificing your legitimacy as a researcher? To be honest, I think emotional accessibility is a shame trigger for researchers and academics. Very early in our training, we are taught that a cool distance and inaccessibility contribute to prestige, and that if you're too relatable, your credentials come into question. (Brown, 2012, p. 12).

In our interviews, Hubert tells me that his research questions often began as questions about his own life and motivations and says, "if someone is researching drugs, it may well be because he has experience with drugs. We are taught as researchers to be objective, but many of our topics originate in subjective ways". (Interview 1, 2019).

Why did Hubert decide to write about himself in a more personal way in 2012 than he had ever done before? Could it be because he had fallen in love a few years before? This powerful experience caused what he calls a reversal of dominance he describes as, “a radical change of the self, implying that I-positions that are present in the background of the repertoire become pushed to the foreground so that they become, temporarily or permanently, dominant in the self. Typically, external ... or internal events ... trigger these radical changes ... ” (Hermans, 2012, p. 73). Was the trigger the rich conversations about new topics with Agnieszka, a scholar in the psychology of emotions and creator of Composition Work (Konopka et al., 2018)? He writes this about the book’s intent,

It is an endeavour to bring the personal and the scientific together, which gives me, more than in previous periods, the opportunity to “show my own face” and to explore to what extent this can be valuable to readers who are willing to join me in this travel, which is, at the same time, a journey in their emotional experiences. (Hermans, 2012, p. 2)

He calls the structure of this particular book “a narrative triangle” because he uses three elements to describe his story: events in his autobiography, the theory, and events in the reader’s life that assist us in understanding “our particular stories, as expressions of more general human processes and phenomena”. (p. 2). This statement is reminiscent of the way in which autoethnographers define their work, which

... shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathise, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn’t be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433)

Very akin to DST, which maintains the importance of an ongoing internal and external dialogue for development of identity, autoethnographers are “... simultaneously, moving inward and outward and inward again, from epiphany, aesthetic moment, or intuition into an ‘interpretive community,’ the group of researchers who also write about our topics and whose conversations we want to join”, (Adams et al., 2015, p. 49). The reflections here also represent a process of dialogical and narrative career construction, describing how life themes personal to Hubert influenced his vocational path (Savickas, 2011).

## Emerging themes

I will describe a number of ways in which Hubert relates to DST in a personal way. In this section, I will also summarise key themes that emerged from our conversations and other data sources and elaborate on those. I use DST and concepts from narrative career construction theory to help frame the analysis of the themes.

### *Tensions between opposites and third positions*

In chronicling the recursive interplay between self and society, career stories explain why individuals make the choices that they do and the private meaning that guides these choices. (Savickas, 2021, p. 1)

One of the core concepts from DST is that although people speak about themselves as a singular, congruent, unified whole, we are in fact diverse, multi-voiced, and seemingly inconsistent. To illustrate this, Hubert tells the story of one Sunday afternoon where he experimented in order to explore the following question, “Am I consistently ‘my-self’ or *one-self* as people readily perceive themselves to be?” (Interview 2, 2019). He took notes throughout the day, recording his changing activities, moods, and thoughts. At one point, sitting quietly and serenely in a chair, he noted a “relaxed self” while a pointed email brought him out of this state almost instantly and shifted his whole demeanour and focus, calling on a different I-position in him to respond. He notes, “each situation

and interactions with different others, brings out a multiplicity of I-positions; I am different if I am meeting my colleague than if I am meeting my love" (Interview 2, 2019).

In one of our interview conversations, Hubert elaborated on two warring parts of himself and how he learned that the relentlessly ambitious researcher I-position was covering for another I-position that had felt inferior since childhood.

- R: In your book, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking* (2012) you speak about the ambitious researcher as having hounded you and that it compensated for the part of you that felt inferior as a result of being bullied at school as a child. I found the story you tell about your 10-year-old self quite affecting, how your uncle teased you and that various teachers considered you stupid and a disappointment. That seems utterly ironic now, of course, but it has had a lasting effect.

The teacher who eventually gave you the liberating moment when he complimented you on your soccer playing was otherwise very severe and punishing; he sounds a lot like your hounding, ambitious "I position" – a harsh taskmaster with an authoritative voice!

With this history in mind, how do you now look upon the ambitious I-position that you described in that chapter? (Hermans, 2012, Chapter 2).

- H: Well, the ambitious I-position, you can never get rid of that. That's deeply rooted, from childhood on (that young period when you're<sup>2</sup> about 10 years old). That negative experience, even in retrospect, is still considerably strong and has formed me. I don't want to say "malformed" me as in hindsight this experience turned out to be constructive, because you engage with it, necessarily so. But it really took a lot of time to recognise that under that ambitious I-position there was an inferior position, the "I" that didn't matter, the "I" who doesn't belong, whose voice is not heard, who talks quietly because it's afraid to step into the foreground – that complex of voices that, for simplicity's sake, I call "the inferior".

This is a relatively recent discovery and it really took some time for that insight to sink in. That the essence is not the ambitious one but the inferior one. It also took some time to accept and process the inferiority of that inferior I-position. *That* is the source, the ambitious one came out of that. Even late in my life, the ambitious part was even more bothersome than the inferior ever was. The ambitious one still drives me though he no longer plays a constructive role; I no longer need to perform (Interview 3, 2019).

I made the discovery doing a two-chair exercise (Elliott & Greenberg, 1997; Gonçalves & Ribeiro, 2012; Rowan, 2011). I discovered then that the ambitious I-position was not just a merciless killer but that it did have constructive sides: he has helped me, to always persevere, to always keep busy, to always make what I was accomplishing better. He has always been performance focused, not socially focused. "I am actually also your friend", he says. I was inspired too by Frans, who said that in his own life, he asked himself, what can I learn from this? (Hermans, Interview 2, 2019).

- R: Yes, I used to find that question of his pedantic, but since his death it has become an internalised motto for me too. I treasure it now. It has in part even led me to write my book on grieving. There! Another example of how others become an extended part of ourselves. Both of us have the I-position, "I as learner in response to adversity or unpleasant experiences"; Frans is part of us now in the best way.
- H: Frans's question, "what can I learn from this" always allows for an escape.
- R: I had not looked at it that way. I can see how, if asked too quickly, it would allow an escape from feelings. What it has done for me is taken me out of the victim narrative. Even in the fact of Frans getting ill and dying, I don't stay long in "why me; why him" but I go to, "what am I learning?" Gratitude and a profound opening are what I am finding is possible in writing my story of bereavement and researching this topic. What fascinates me about DST, as I read your book, is that I see that each time there was a tension of opposites in your life, something new was born from it.

### **Third positions**

Hermans describes being both "a dreamer" and "recognition seeker" in his youth, two I-positions that were in opposition to each other and became a useful third position, "the creative position" (2012, p. 31). Hermans determined that this third position was a promoter position as it

stimulated my social, scientific, and artistic development over the years. A special feature of a promoter position is that it stimulates the development of a broader range of more specific internal positions of the self and brings them to a higher level of integration. (p. 33)

From this experience, he determined that “motivation to achieve something is particularly strong when initially conflicting I-positions can be brought together at some higher level of integration” (p. 31).

While reading this more autobiographical book, aptly titled, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking* (2012), I noticed that Hubert’s I-position of an enthusiastically *engaged researcher*, who digs into new topics with energy and a vengeance<sup>3</sup> took turns with another useful, but de-centering I-position: the *discontented researcher!*

Whenever Hermans felt he had exhausted a topic or that it lacked the necessary depth and complexity to serve any further, he would experience strong discontentment and adjust his direction or even leave behind a whole line of research (perhaps picking it up later to create a higher level of integration and insight). Seen from the level of the meta-position, which combines two or more I-positions and allows a helicopter view (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), the tension between these two positions resulted in an *innovator position*.

One might say that without I-as-engaged researcher there could be no energy to work, but without the I-as-discontented researcher, there would be no motivation to seek further depth and breadth and his work might have risked stagnation. This “I-as-innovator” (my wording) which I distil from Hubert’s writings, showed itself in a rather literal way in Hermans’s travels in the United States in 1968 where he visited various places, universities, and met with many different colleagues, each time leaving a place when he seemed to have exhausted its innovative potential (Hermans, 2012, Chapter 1).

### **Research interests originate from personal drivers**

Hubert was driven by both his talents and his struggles and uses his life as a foundation for his research questions. In part, his vulnerabilities and talents drove him and drive him in his process of discovery, conceptualising, and sharpening his insights. In a workshop presented by career coach Barbara Sher said rather poignantly, “talent + pain = drive” (2012) a concept that career counselling scholar Mark Savickas says in his own words, inspired by Alfred Adler’s work, “we are always trying to master what we passively suffered” (Savickas, 1997, p. 11).

To be a reflexive researcher or practitioner it behoves us to see where our pain and tensions lie as we may well be working to alleviate that strain in the science we choose to embark on. Again, as Savickas pointed out, our occupations are frequently a response to problems that have occupied us over a lifetime, starting in childhood (Savickas, 2012). Two literal examples of this are researchers Bessel van der Kolk (2014) and Mark Wolynn (2017) who study trauma and epigenetics, realising their own interest in the subject stem from how their parents’ war experiences left them with secondary trauma responses. Savickas’s own career construction work stems from his father’s struggle with employment themes.

### **The dialogical self theory grows Hubert**

Going back to my notes, I may find a different emphasis on the same thing or even a contrasting view on the subject. It is as if I meet another person who is actually the “same” person as I am. But meeting this person in his “alterity,” broadens my view of the moment ... (Hermans, 2012, p. 28)

Not only has DST grown as a result of Hermans’s talents and personal questions, but DST in turn grows Hubert. From our conversations, I note that as he develops his theory, he also develops his identity further. He does so by examining himself through his theory in a generative way (i.e. which allows him to ask interesting questions about himself and develop meta- and promoter

positions). He is continually noticing the evolution of I-positions, testing his ideas on himself, writing down observations about himself and others, and being willing to open to surprises and new discoveries. That he used DST and the two-chair exercise to find out who was driving the I-as-ambitious researcher is one example of his identity learning using his own concepts and principles. In sum: he encounters himself, is good company for himself, questions himself, uses himself as a guinea pig, and at times, even heals himself continually referencing DST as a frame for self-understanding (Interview 3, 2019). By extension, he can position himself to be moved by things seemingly “outside” its frames (e.g. transcendental de-positioning; compelling music).

### ***Combining insights***

It appears that in identifying where his “killing” drive was coming from, developing his emotional and social sides in his second marriage, enjoying his research activities not to perform but to create, and continuing to use insights from DST to reflect, Hubert has come to balance. In my conversations with Hubert, I describe him as a happy researcher, I note,

you walk, you bike, you enjoy your writing, you are still creative, you have good people around you, you have plenty of time to be alone which you say you need, and you even sleep well! You sound like a happy researcher.

Hubert agrees with this label “happy researcher”. To know our pain, to dare to feel it, and then to name it with compassion, we are freed.

### ***Maturing as a researcher: closing and opening to criticism***

As I listened to the interviews, read portions of his book – in particular the text *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking* (Hermans, 2012), I became interested in how Hermans matured as a scientist. He admitted to at first being afraid of criticism but later opening to it. I sent Hubert additional questions in order to explore this topic further. The following text is from an email exchange we had on 20–21 June 2020. I have integrated his replies with some fresh dialogue here as well and he reviewed the final product to assess if it represented an accurate picture of his thinking.

- R: In your interview you said that you used to be afraid of critiques, but now you see their value. Which critiques of your theory would you say were legitimate and helped you revise your thinking?
- H: Over time I have been thinking about the critical comments that colleagues brought forward where they said that DST paid too little attention to the importance of the body. I noticed that I did not have a fitting response to that and I had to walk around with that for a few years.
- R: I note here that you use the term “walk around with that” – which is a very physical expression of your process!
- H: Yes! Finally, I decided to write a book about that; the book that I am writing now which has the working title “Liberation in the face of uncertainty: A new development in Dialogical Self Theory”.<sup>4</sup> In the book, I devote a whole chapter to the body as the foundation of the self. By writing about that, I become aware that the central concept “I-position” – as a result of the spatial nature of that concept itself – that this provides a basis for relating to the importance of the body. Here is a quote from the book,

In agreement with Plato, “I as rational,” “I as strong,” and “I as desiring” play, as I-positions, central roles in the organization of the self. However, from DST perspective, there are many additional positions that can be inferred from the form and function of the body. Consider the following examples. With my eyes, I try to make contact with the person with whom I have fallen in love; my throat and mouth enable me to use my voice so that I can express my sympathy for somebody who suffers; using my ears, I try to listen to somebody who deserves my full attention; the stimulation of my sex organs make me feel that I desire someone; I clench my fist to express my anger; and I protrude my tongue to tease, challenge or insult somebody. Our language is quite wealthy in its references to body parts that symbolize our positioning to the world. I “raise my eyebrows” when I hear something with which I strongly disagree. I “turn up my nose” when somebody makes a despicable remark, I “turn my back” on somebody when I no longer want to listen to them. I stand out “head and shoulders” above my competitors. In other words, a large variety of body parts and their function can be used to refer, in their great variety and many contrasts, to embodied ways of positioning towards others, like “I as loving,” “I as hating,” “I as despising,” “I as listening,” “I as teasing,” and many other ways of positioning ourselves towards other persons in the

world. Reference to our body and body functions serve as a goldmine for beneficial actions and as a stinking swamp for the expression of our shadow positions. (Hermans, [in press](#)).

R: What helped you accept criticism as you matured as a scholar?

H: Initially I experienced the presence of fear at the judgement of others. Especially when I had thought of something that was not yet accepted by mainstream psychology where my very new thoughts could easily be trampled by colleagues who didn't see value in the research. I remember that some of my university colleagues said, "Hermans is a hobbyist".

Later I could interpret that as a compliment and not a rejection because I would wish this for my critics too: to practice science like a hobby. What helped me, as I got older, was to accept the critique of my work. Many times, I experienced the push that this gave to the quality of my articles and books. When you get criticised, one has to swallow a few times, then there is a phase of confusion, and finally, by walking around with it for a while, you have a "aha-Erlebnis"<sup>5</sup> and you find a good response that also improves the quality of the article or book. I have learned that criticism, in particular constructive criticism, raises the quality of the work and is even stimulating for your creativity.

R: Here you use "walking around with it" again and I also note the body-oriented metaphor, "swallowing". You also switched pronouns from "I" to "you" which shows a degree of (likely useful) distance from the experience of receiving criticism. It's as if you're speaking to yourself (and perhaps to younger researchers like myself) and saying, "You can work well with criticism ... it can even stimulate your creativity". In narrative healing research by Pennebaker (2011) pronoun switching is usually a sign of a beneficial narrative; you are able to switch perspectives quite literally, and in this case observe yourself and extend the wisdom to others, (i.e. the you). In DST, you might say that you've 're-positioned' yourself in relationship to criticism.

H: In the end, you learn more from the people who criticise you than you do from those who pat you on the back, though you need pats on the back too. In addition to critics you need people who believe in you, even if it's just one person!

R: This reminds me of what Buddhist monk Pema Chödrön tells in her books and talks: that we need some wretchedness and some joy to grow (Chödrön, 2000). So, how do you enact this?

H: I have, in the end, after several decades, established a procedure that works well for me. After I get started with an idea (via thoughts, notes I take, conversations with several trusted others who ask good questions, and daydreaming), I close myself for the judgements of others for a time.

I want to give my full concentration to the topic. In this phase, it's crucial for me to go my own way and to believe in the value of what I am trying to achieve and am focused on. After that I begin to write and that requires that I close myself off from the world for a bit. Only after I'm done with the writing and thinking is it time for me to throw it to the lions.

If you have the courage to allow the work to be criticised, then it comes time to swallow the bitter pill and finally it will stimulate you to discover what you really want to achieve and want to share with the world.

R: The image of throwing one's ideas to the lions is a powerful metaphor! It has a visceral feel to it: your ideas can be torn to shreds at this point! I'm struck by how you switched again to the "you" pronoun; you say, "for me to throw it to the lions" to "you have to have the courage ... " It's as if by evoking the "you" (out there) you can receive the lioness attacks that are no longer directed at "I" which feels too close!

H: Yes, and from the ashes of your own text you ultimately rise up. This is easier said than done. It costs you many years to be able to do this. It requires a combination of a stubborn<sup>6</sup> commitment to one's originality and openness to criticism, and this is not a given.

R: Can you tell an actual story of when someone criticised DST or its principles or your methods and it was perhaps painful at the time but also useful upon reflection?

H: Someone told me that DST would put her into a schizophrenic mind. She said, "I have no desire for those multiple I-positions – I'm just myself". I heard this objection from more people. I realised: the foundational idea of DST (dynamic multiplicity of I-positions) was not coming across.

R: I understand this issue and it has occurred in my work in a similar way. In my 25 years of teaching writing for personal development, I once received a very similar critique. I was not yet aware of DST, but I was aware of Hal and Sidra Stone's work in Voice Dialogue (2007) and Assagioli's psychosynthesis model of

“sub-personalities” (1965). I had an exercise, in hindsight (unfortunately named I now see), “writing with our multiple personality” where the idea was to speak to a wiser self within one’s multi-voiced being. Unbeknownst to me at the time, one of the students had a multiple personality disorder and reported being triggered by the exercise: an “attacker” personality had arisen. Later when I taught writing workshops and gave presentations for mental health organisations, I was very careful to explain the fundamental difference between the “dialogical self” and multiple personality disorder. In working with the dialogical self, one never loses sight of other I-positions in play and can observe this at a meta-level. One doesn’t become *one* personality to the exclusion of the rest; the shifting of positions is something one can observe. Using DST in the exercise it is playful and imbued with a sense of having resources within and as an extended part of the self (e.g. the wise voice might be the Dalai Lama who I imagine I’m writing to and who writes back to me as I position myself in his way of being).

H: Yes, beautiful, and accurately formulated, Reinekke. You might say that the multiple personality is more a successive monologue rather than a simultaneous dialogue!

I also discovered it helped to explain the concept of a dynamic multiplicity of positions to people in simple terms. In a given day, you play many different roles: mother, wife, student, the child of your parents etc. These are all social-role based I-positions. Every day you also go through an array of other, more personal I-positions: lover of music, dreamer, nature lover, foodie ... all positions that play a role in your relationship with others and with yourself. If I explain it that way, people understand. Apparently, they are still addicted to the traditional Cartesian idea of the self as “oneness” – as something that exists in and of itself separate from relationships and situations.

R: What would you say to younger, less experienced scholars about receiving and working with criticism?

H: I would recommend to everyone not to avoid criticism but rather to seek it out, but only after an idea has a more or less “solid” form. You first need the time to let an idea or plan ripen within and take shape. Only after that, you can open yourself to critique.

In a general way, I would advise starting scientists to train themselves in the process of opening and closing as complimentary attitudes. If you can’t open, you run the risk, blind to this yourself, that you will remain trapped in a bubble of your own favourite ideas. If you can’t close, you run the risk of having your newly generated ideas and thoughts swept away by the maelstrom of the information that confronts you daily.

Find for yourself the optimal moment to open yourself and the right moment to close. In the phase of opening, a flood of knowledge sources and possibilities flow in that provide the basic material for working. In the closing phase, you concentrate on your project and you go on until it’s (tentatively) complete, *after* that you open yourself for the input of others.

R: This reminds of what contemporary poet and speaker David Whyte says about how our creative ideas take shape in the dark. He uses the metaphor of the seed growing in the dark soil – it would be destroyed if you dug it up to take a look or if it were exposed while trying to germinate. Just like a mother carrying a child inside: it is protected there from the elements until it is fully formed. Premature birth is dangerous. I can see how this metaphor works in the turn-taking process you are describing. Opening and closing at the appropriate moments in service of the birth of new knowledge.

H: Precisely, and because it is so difficult to combine these two attitudes and to know when to switch modes, it’s important to train yourself to be able to do this. (Email, 21 June 2020).

### ***Stepping out of the ivory tower***

As I say throughout this article and in conversation with Hubert, it is important to be reminded of a researcher’s humanity as it can expand the way we understand their contributions and also receive their potential mistakes. The use of the phrase “stepping out of the ivory tower” is important for several reasons: it can inspire younger scholars and give them confidence, decreasing their hurdles and the time it takes for them to start trusting their own ideas – even if those ideas are initially poor and unrefined (e.g. my own father admitting to anxiety, made it normal to talk about my own fears and embark on personal development). This knowledge of a researcher’s

humanity can breakdown the atmosphere of elitism that may be a source of anti-science thinking; we may even reduce the aggression and suspicion aimed at researchers' legitimate findings (Rutjens et al., 2018).

It can make colleagues more willing to come forward with critique without needing to attack out of fear of an authoritarian or impenetrable response. It can bring understanding that researchers too are fallible and that admitting to mistakes need not damage their professional standing. Reducing a researcher's need to engage in "identity maintenance" (see Lengelle, 2021) can have notable effects on scientific integrity.

## Limitations of the research

The fact that I know Hubert Hermans as both a friend and close colleague may lead readers to believe that I cannot be objective. Of course, this is true. I am subjective and I am writing about his life in a collaborative way and viewing and curating what I find through my own interests and views. This is what autoethnographers do and they openly say so; in fact, it is their deliberate practice. Put in similar terms, "Constructivist-interpretive researchers seek to use dialogical exchanges with participants in order to uncover meanings that are held by sets of people or systems, while exemplifying their process of analysis in order to illustrate and make transparent their interpretive processes" (Levitt et al., 2017, pp. 6–7).

## Conclusion

The death  
of my beloved brother  
to turn this into a creation  
to birth something new into the world  
that carries the mark of him.  
He is not simply dead  
I have not simply lost him.  
I have stirred him newly to life within myself  
and he goes on  
in the deeper layers  
of my soul  
in order to inspire me  
and  
there, he will persist.

I began this article about Hubert Hermans after completing a book manuscript on grief and therapeutic writing in which, as mentioned before, I used DST to reflect on my continued bond with my deceased spouse, Frans. DST helped me to describe and conceptualise what it was I was doing as I experienced Frans as an extended part of myself and continued to feel I was talking to him (Lengelle, 2021).

As I returned to the recorded interviews with Hubert, gathered his books from two different shelves in my house, cleared my desk, and began to immerse myself in everything Hermans and DST, Hubert let me know one of his beloved brothers had died. We wrote to each other about the continuing dialogues I was having with Frans and he was having with his brother. The poem by Hubert was a "found poem" in a paragraph Hubert wrote to me, which I sent back to him with line breaks. We were both moved to tears as we talked about our losses and some of the poignant poetic writing that seemed both spontaneous and necessary.

I told Hubert, "Frans truly feels like an 'internalised I-position' without sounding like my own voice". In my book, I wrote that Frans is a part of

my self-repertoire just as he was in life, only when he was alive, he could contribute to the conversation in a literal way and now he only does so figuratively. Of course, his imagined responses are based on what he likely would have said. I do not have complete liberty to have anything I wish come out of his dialogical mouth, post death, just as novelists will tell you they don't control their story's characters and thus cannot randomly determine what these fictional personalities will say. (Lengelle, 2021, p. 168)

Hubert replied, "even in an imaginary dialogue with the other, his presence/absence contributes to the content of the dialogue. Beautiful!" (email 22 May 2020).

In the meantime, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out around the world and changed the way we could quite literally position ourselves. This required rather creative solutions to a number of problems and one of the most innovative and fun of these attempts at "repositioning" came from Hubert.

Part of his way of working is that he goes out for long walks, takes his notebook with him, and stops in local cafes and restaurants near his home. It is a very picturesque part of the country with rolling hills and high-end restaurants and Hubert likes pastry with coffee. Hubert, who was used to literally positioning himself in such lovely places, in order to "re-position" not only himself, but his inner space for innovation, was, like the rest of us, faced with closed restaurants, social distancing, and the lockdown measures of the pandemic. He wrote to me in an email on 19 March 2020 to address this:

Things are going well for me. For a writer sitting inside is no punishment. What I do miss are the quaint restaurants that I usually go to about four times a week at the end of a walk or bike ride. Well, I have found something to remedy that. I have bought a Thermos from the Hema and have arranged a "little self-restaurant", made of: a bicycle, waffles, a backpack, and my notebook and then I go biking or walking and go sit on a bench somewhere, where with some satisfaction I munch away. I have also thought of a name for this little place: Hubistro. For the time being I can go on like this.

This delightful anecdote, which made me laugh, also made me consider the way in which Hubert lives poetically. He is not only a successful scholar, a respected author, but he is a vulnerable human and discoverer of life. His way of working has inspired me and confirmed a number of things that I see are at the heart of my own academic flourishing and my students' well-being. It matters who we are, what pain and talent we bring to our work, and how we wish to engage in research we might do in the humanities and social sciences. The cliché is that we must "dare be ourselves" – and revisiting that expression, we see that the grammar gets it right: it's not "dare to be ourselves" but "ourselves". We must engage with – and embody – the many "positions" that together make up our shifting identity – that dynamic multiplicity of positions in the society of mind and embodiment. Our I-positions are a source of curiosity, at times they seem a cacophony of stress and confusion, while through noticing them, opening and closing to others in appropriate moments, writing in ways that create a narrative about how the positions relate to one another, as well as untangling the conceptual threads, we may, rather paradoxically, experience self as both an aesthetically complex multiplicity as well as a graceful whole.

## Notes

1. I deliberately use the name "Hermans" when discussing topics or I-positions emphasising the professional and "Hubert" when the topic seems more personal, though this article shows that the personal and the professional are intricately linked.
2. I note that Hubert uses "your" when he describes being hurt or criticised, switching pronouns from I to you, and perhaps "re-positioning" himself in this way, as if to look from the outside in and not feel the impact of that hurt again. This pronoun shifting happens again in the way he describes processing critiques on DST.
3. His friend and early collaborator, Harry Kempen used to call Hubert "the sharpener" (Hermans, 2012, p. 30).
4. This book is set to be published with Cambridge University Press.
5. A noun from German that means, "An experience which gives a sudden insight, solution or answer to a problem that has troubled someone for some time". Wikipedia (retrieved 22 June 2020).
6. The Dutch word was "eigenzinnigheid" which is difficult to translate; it refers to stubbornness, obstinacy, but also as the softer word "zinnig" in it that also means "of the senses".

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