

Working with Voice Dialogue and the Psychology of Selves¹

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'On the journey of self-discovery, let's stop looking for what is wrong with us. Let us discover, instead, who we are and how we work! Let us separate from our judgments as we explore the amazing system of selves within us, and learn to live our lives with ever-increasing honesty, choice, and freedom.'

Hal en Sidra Stone (1993, p. 13)

Introduction

Voice Dialogue is a powerful and non-judgmental method for guiding people towards a better understanding of their inner urges and motives. The Voice Dialogue facilitator literally engages in a conversation with the various selves (subpersonalities) of the client. This way, he² gains more insight into the various sides and feelings within him. This leads to more self-acceptance, freedom of choice and the expansion of the behavioral repertoire. The 'Psychology of Selves' and Voice Dialogue methods are described further on in this article. We will review the indications and contraindications, the role of the facilitator as well as how Voice Dialogue relates to other models developed in client-centered therapies.

Voice Dialogue in the Netherlands

Voice Dialogue is a psychological theory and a method for individual guidance developed in the early seventies of the previous century in California. In the Netherlands, Voice Dialogue is mostly known among coaches and trainers. In America, many psychologists and psychotherapists also use this body of thought. During a workshop I conducted in the autumn of 2012 for the Southern Netherlands's division of the *VCgP*[†] in Eindhoven (Grommisch, 2013), it became clear that the attending client-centered psychologists see possibilities for applying Voice Dialogue in their own practices. This contribution is intended for you to become acquainted with Voice Dialogue and to give you an idea how this method could complement your current way of working.

The founders Hal and Sidra Stone

Voice Dialogue was developed by American psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone. Hal Stone was trained as a Jungian analyst and he was chairman of the Society for Analytical Psychology in Los Angeles for two years. He personally met with Carl Gustav Jung and this encounter left an indelible impression on him. Sidra Stone was trained as a behavioral therapist in the behaviorist tradition. They met in 1972, married and worked together on the development of their 'psychology of selves and the aware ego process' and Voice Dialogue method for the rest of their lives. For the past 42 years, they have developed and refined their theory and method of working step by step. They describe this development in the article 'The Basic Elements of Voice Dialogue' (Stone & Stone, 2007). Even though Hal and Sidra have reached a venerable age, they both still provide individual as well as relationship therapy at their practice in Albion, California. In

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[†] *VCgP*, Vereniging voor Cliëntgerichte Psychotherapie: Society for Client-Centered Psychotherapy

the meantime, their body of thought and method are being used by psychologists, psychotherapists, relationship therapists, coaches and trainers in various countries around the world. I first came into contact with it in 1999 and became truly fascinated. Time and time again, I see the liberating and healing effects of it in my work as a coach and Voice Dialogue trainer.

Psychology of Selves

The Voice Dialogue method is based on the *psychology of selves* (Stone & Stone, 1989). In this psychological theory, we start from the idea that a person is made up of not one, but a large number of *selves*, also called subpersonalities or parts. These selves have their own way of behaving, their own history, and act on our behalf in their own way. Some of our selves work closely together whereas others have conflicting desires.

Most clients recognize these constant inner dialogues within themselves. Sometimes the dialogues are meaningless and confusing; quite often, our selves cause inner tension, split feelings and doubt.

Primary and disowned selves

Subpersonalities come in all shapes and sizes. Every person has a number of strongly developed selves and selves they are not so familiar with. In our book 'Me, my selves and I. Discovering other sides of yourself with Voice Dialogue' we compare our personality to a bus. 'Your various selves are the passengers and you are the driver, nicely seated behind the wheel. The thing is, your selves do not all want to go in the same direction, and they each have their own ideas about how the bus should be driven. For instance, your Perfectionist wants you to drive excellently, your Pleaser wants everyone to be comfortable, and your Pusher wants you to reach your destination as soon as possible. If, every now and again, each of these passengers were to express their wishes to you, the driver, the situation would still be manageable. The problem is that they regularly push you aside and grab the wheel themselves. As a result, your freedom of choice is lost.' (Brugman, Budde & Collewijn, 2010, pp. 18-19).

The selves on the bus are not all equally influential. Some of them are loud, while others can barely be heard. The strongly developed selves determine a great deal of our behavior and how other people see us. We call these our primary selves. At the other end of the bus, more towards the rows in the back, or tucked away somewhere underneath the gas tank, there are a number of other selves. They are there, but you can hardly hear them, or at least you are putting a lot of energy into ignoring or repressing them. We call these our disowned selves.

The position a subpersonality acquires in our life is determined by a combination of nature and nurture. Primary selves are the sides which step forward to prevent us from getting hurt. They serve as a bodyguard and are set off whenever they sense any danger. Disowned selves are precisely those sides that must step aside in order for us to avoid pain and rejection.

This process occurs in each of us. Which subpersonalities become primary and which become disowned is different for each person, each situation and for each culture. One person might develop a Pleaser as a primary subpersonality while the Pleaser becomes disowned for someone else.

There are an infinite number of subpersonalities. In Voice Dialogue, we prefer not to work with fixed names or typologies, but to let clients describe and eventually name their subpersonalities

themselves. At the same time, certain subpersonalities are well known to a lot of people, such as the Pleaser, the Responsible Self, the Perfectionist, the Pusher, the Rational Thinker, the Fighter, the Victim, the Inner Critic, the Inner Child. Using these names can help to explain the psychology of selves to a client.

Vulnerability and the Inner Child

Vulnerability is a key concept in Voice Dialogue. As human beings, we are all vulnerable. After all, there are numerous risks in life, such as rejection, an angry look, being considered dumb, pain, loss, illness.

In Voice Dialogue, the concepts of vulnerability and the Inner Child go hand in hand. Our primary selves protect our Inner Children. They protect our Playful Child, who can be punished for being too lively; our Shy Child, who gives us a sense of shame; our Fearful Child, who can make us afraid or who can be seen as weak by other people; our Vulnerable Child, who can be rejected when it shows affection for someone.

However, when we only listen to our primary selves, the other sides gradually come under pressure. In entrusting our vulnerability to our primary selves, we repress our other sides and, eventually, must suffer the consequences: always having to put on a good face, perfectionism, headaches, losing strength or your lust for life, always having to be nice and so on.

Voice Dialogue is geared towards becoming more conscious of this often unconscious inner power play and seeks to enlarge the client's ability to utilize all his inner sides. Voice Dialogue helps us reconnect with the sensitivity and abilities of our Inner Children: creativity, intimacy, shyness, fear, strength, lust (for life). It also helps us to once again gain access to the energy of our disowned selves.

The Aware Ego

In order to embrace and make use of our vulnerability, we must develop an Aware Ego. This is another key concept of Voice Dialogue. The Aware Ego is our ability to observe two or more of our inner sides, to experience them and, at the same time, to not coincide with them. It is also our ability to become aware of, embrace, tolerate and manage the tension and feelings of vulnerability that can arise from this experience. The Aware Ego is not a subpersonality, nor is it a place where you can reside all the time. Rather, it is a moment where you are aware of the various sides, a state of being you can consciously go where you can hear all the inner voices. The Aware Ego is like a manager of the selves, who listens to all inner employees equally seriously, but who remains in charge at all times.

This is not that simple, as we are often not so aware of our selves. We do not often take the time to truly listen to what the various sides have to tell us. We usually prefer to push aside anything that makes us vulnerable as quickly as possible. This prevents the messages and feelings of our selves from reaching our consciousness. With the Voice Dialogue method, you can help your client to actively and consciously listen to all of the selves and to hear each of their messages. In doing so, the Aware Ego grows, along with our ability to direct our selves.

The Voice Dialogue method and the role of the facilitator

Alongside their psychological theory, Hal and Sidra Stone also developed a method for working with subpersonalities. In Voice Dialogue, the caregiver is called the facilitator.

In a Voice Dialogue session, the facilitator literally engages in a conversation with the various subpersonalities of the client. This enables the client to become acquainted with his inner forces and to direct himself more effectively, including all of his sides. One of the most important elements of the Voice Dialogue method is that the client gets to know his own subpersonalities by literally stepping into their shoes. The facilitator does not talk to the client about the different sides within him, but instead talks directly with his sides. This way, they can all speak in turn, independent from one another, the same way you would have a conversation with the individual members of a team.

The aim is that your client must first physically experience and get to know a subpersonality (identify) so that he can disconnect or separate from them at a later stage (disidentify). Not to say goodbye to them, but for him to see and experience that this self is just one side of him. The facilitator facilitates the introduction of the client to his subpersonalities. Hence, the name facilitator.

Three levels of learning: three levels of consciousness

In a Voice Dialogue session, we work on the development of the Aware Ego. This awareness is constantly moving and develops on three different levels. Voice Dialogue is a predominantly experience oriented way of working with a clear structure.

At the beginning of the session, the client sits in a chair directly facing the facilitator. We call this chair the Ego Position. This is where the session begins and ends. A session starts off by exploring the theme the client wants to discuss at that time. Here, the facilitator does not focus so much on *what* the client is saying, but rather on *who* within him is speaking. After exploring the theme, one or more subpersonalities are invited to speak separately. Multiple selves can be explored in one session: Primary, Disowned and Vulnerable selves. This does not follow a specific plan, but plays out rather organically, according to what occurs naturally. This leads to three levels of consciousness.

Experiencing your various subpersonalities

On the first level, the client becomes aware of his subpersonalities by literally experiencing them. He explores his subpersonalities by stepping into their shoes and giving them a place in the room. He completely identifies with them. In doing so, he discovers who his subpersonalities are, how they think and act, when they step forward and why. He learns what motivates them and experiences how his body feels and responds when a certain subpersonality is active.

In this phase of the session, the facilitator helps the client to fully coincide with a subpersonality. This is an adventurous and fascinating process.

A basic rule for working with Voice Dialogue is that the primary selves get to speak first, before the disowned or vulnerable selves are explored. Examining the primary selves is crucial. The client can only truly come into contact with his disowned sides when he is less identified with his primary sides.

Paul is 42 years old and he is always ready with an answer. He is seldom at a loss for words. It was not always this way. When Paul was in primary school, he was bullied and was defenseless against it. This was very painful for him. At that time, a self in him stood up and saw to it that Paul would never be hurt again by what anyone else had to say: an Answer-For-Everything-self. This self is very quick to respond, cheerful and witty and he always has the last say. And, as a result, Paul did really well for himself. He is now a very successful lawyer. However, his colleagues think he is superficial and his wife complains she misses intimacy. Paul wants to do something about this. In a Voice Dialogue session, I first start a conversation with his primary self: Answer-For-Everything. After all, he sees to it that Paul feels safe. Once Paul has gotten to know this side and can distinguish himself from it, there is room for his disowned self, who is probably shy and sometimes does not have an answer ready. Only then can this side be safely examined, acknowledged and valued by Paul. If I were to address his disowned self straight away, chances are this side would not come forward at all. Answer-For-Everything would surely see to that.

A client can only let go of the protective role of a primary self when he:

- knows that side is there;
- experiences (physically and emotionally) and knows (cognitively) how this side operates within him;
- knows what this side is protecting him from;
- has something else at his disposal with which he can feel and manage his vulnerability, what his primary self is protecting him from.

This is precisely what a client discovers by identifying with a subpersonality. At this stage, the role of the facilitator is to invite a primary self to come to life as much as possible. This requires the facilitator to have an inquisitive and respectful attitude. For this, she has to let the subpersonality feel she really wants to get to know this self. The subpersonality comes more to life when he notices the facilitator is genuinely interested and really wants to understand him.

This is much more a process of aligning energies than it is a cognitive one. Here, the facilitator has two techniques at her disposal: resonance and induction.

What do we mean by aligning energies? The facilitator tunes in to what a certain subpersonality is projecting. After all, every subpersonality has their own personality: warm, personable, accessible, open, compelling, intense, cold, threatening, seductive, playful. The facilitator attempts to summon the same energy within herself, so she can communicate on the same frequency as her client's subpersonality (resonance). She resonates with them, like a tuning fork on a piano. She pays close attention to the subpersonality's gestures, intonation and facial expressions and adjusts her posture, voice and choice of words accordingly. Then she responds and asks questions that are aligned with the subpersonality's character (induction). For example, a facilitator will never ask a rational subpersonality questions about feelings, but rather speak in a succinct, sober and analytical tone. With an introvert subpersonality, the facilitator will use more silence, and with an angry subpersonality she will say things so this subpersonality can experience his own

aggression. This way, the subpersonality will sense he is welcome and that he can be himself. The facilitator uses her posture and questions to reflect what the subpersonality is showing her. She helps to bring non-conscious aspects to the client's consciousness. The closer the facilitator is able to stay with the subpersonality's experience, the more her reflections can guide the subpersonality to self-discovery, and the more the underlying vulnerability can be experienced.

The facilitator also pays close attention to any changes in a subpersonality's energy. When you give a subpersonality the space they need, they are usually done talking rather quickly, thus creating room for their counterpart. An experienced Voice Dialogue facilitator will notice this and invite the client to return to the Ego Position. Now, the next voice can be explored. This subpersonality chooses a new spot in the room (sitting, standing, sometimes lying down or moving) and the facilitator directs herself to whoever presents themselves.

Although this may sound deceptively simple, it is remarkable to witness the impact it has on a client each time they get to know a subpersonality. By making contact with a certain subpersonality, he fully experiences that side. Sometimes it can be quite a revelation to him that he even had that self. He can hear what this side feels, thinks and wants. And he can hear himself say things about himself that he never knew were there. 'Oh, is *that* why this side is in my life?' Gaining access to this information is an invaluable experience. Often, the client becomes more compassionate with himself.

The facilitator is always careful not to want to change subpersonalities or send them away. Furthermore, subpersonalities do not talk to each other during the session, and there is no negotiating with them. Subpersonalities can stay who they are; they are allowed to, but do not have to tone themselves down or make compromises. They do not have to become friends with other subpersonalities. After all, you cannot ask a Pleaser to learn to say no, because that is not his job. It is better to leave that to an Autonomous Self. Even the smallest Pleaser will always have a tough time saying no. In the end, the client chooses which direction to take, and preferably as much as possible from within his Aware Ego. He can decide to say yes or no and has to reassure the Pleaser when he chooses to say no.

Developing an Aware Ego

After the facilitator has explored a subpersonality with the client, the client returns to his chair, the Ego Position. In this place, he experiences the difference between coinciding with a subpersonality 100% and then separating from it. Once the client has returned from a subpersonality to the Ego Position, the facilitator also lets go of this subpersonality's energy and adopts an open and neutral posture. The facilitator invites the client to experience the difference between the subpersonality and himself. This way, she stimulates the development of the Aware Ego with the client.

He disidentifies from his subpersonality and sees that this self is only a part of him. His Aware Ego has grown.

Once returned to the Ego Position, there is always a reaction to the explored subpersonality. Sometimes the client is moved by the realization of what this side has been doing for him for so many years. Sometimes the client becomes irritated by the burden this self has caused. Sometimes there is sadness, rest, or an increased understanding. Anything that occurs is welcome and provides

information for exploring the next subpersonality. Suppose the client becomes irritated in the Ego Position, then the facilitator can address the self that is so irritated. He clearly has a different opinion about everything and wants it to be heard. This side's energy is now at the forefront.

After exploring each subpersonality, the client returns to the Ego Position to disidentify from them. A session always ends in this place. It is from within the Aware Ego that the client learns to embrace and manage his selves.

Awareness

Right before the end of a session, the facilitator invites the client to come sit or stand next to her. The facilitator summarizes the essence of the session and the client listens and looks on as a neutral observer. The facilitator speaks in the third person about the client and his subpersonalities.

The place where the client hears this report we call the Awareness. Looking back neutrally on the session in this way helps the client get a good overview and has an integrating effect.

After the Awareness, the client returns to the Ego Position one more time to round off the session.

Results

By working with Voice Dialogue, the client's awareness of his subpersonalities grows, as does his ability to decide when he wants to use which of his sides. He increasingly learns to sit behind the steering wheel and to consult with the passengers on his bus, if he so chooses. Or, to use a different metaphor: he becomes the conductor of his inner orchestra and learns to direct each member individually. Sometimes he wants the violins to play louder, sometimes more gently. Sometimes, he uses the percussion. At other times, he uses the harp.

People who experience Voice Dialogue are often surprised about the impact and the effect of exploring subpersonalities. The increased ability to see oneself as composed of multiple selves creates room for those sides which had to be repressed until now. Clients express how their sense of self-esteem increases and that they are now able to respond to a certain situation in more than one way. People mention an increased freedom to act and a decrease in self-criticism. Voice Dialogue helps a client make more conscious choices and gives them more flexibility and balance. The client learns to stand between two of his opposing sides, to embrace both of them and to discover what is valuable and acceptable to both of them. This also gives him more energy, because it takes energy to repress sides of yourself.

Indications and contraindications

Voice Dialogue is being used successfully in individual therapy, relationship therapy, coaching, career coaching and corporate training. It is very useful for dilemmas and a variety of questions where someone wants to investigate their various internal reactions. The condition is that the client must be able to work with the idea of having multiple inner sides and that he can manage exploring those sides and letting them speak one at a time. This requires a sufficient degree of self-reflection and strength of ego. Voice Dialogue is a very revealing way of working and it can easily bring a lot to the surface. This method is less suitable for clients with a borderline structure or a fragmented self.

Voice Dialogue's relation to other forms of therapy³

Voice Dialogue stems from a humanistic vision. It does not start from what is 'wrong' with you. The starting point is always 'what there is and how it is'. It is an approach that promotes self-acceptance and self-esteem and at the same time it gives the client the hope and confidence that he is capable of giving space to the other sides within him.

It provides a theory and an instrument with which the client experientially learns to consider himself as comprised of parts with which he does not necessarily have to coincide. A key benefit is that the client can begin to experience a distinction between himself and a certain inner reaction. Voice Dialogue helps to really listen to voices which are often quickly silenced. This way, that side's underlying concern can enter his consciousness and be taken seriously. Clients learn how to better connect with their feelings of vulnerability and, by extension, how to take better care of that vulnerability.

In that sense, this approach belongs in the tradition of client-centered therapy. Deliberately separating and dealing with parts of the self can also be found in psychodrama and emotion-focused therapy (EFT). In EFT as well, contact is made with aspects of the self on an experiential level. However, here, the different parts do engage directly in a dialogue with each other - as opposed to the Voice Dialogue method.

In particular, a lot has been written about the subpersonality of the Inner Critic, a term introduced to client-centered literature by Gendlin (1981). Ways to deal with the Inner Critic can be found in the work of Nele Stinckens (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2004, Stinckens, 2008). Stinckens et al. describe a process task which can lead to the Inner Critic having a less dominant and destructive impact. Stinckens incorporates insights from various authors into her definition of the Inner Critic (2008, p. 438-441), including Stone and Stone. Stinckens distinguishes three processes of change: removing the experiential blockade, restoring the interactions between the various aspects of self and developing an active and integrating self. Here, in particular, we recognize establishing an emotional contact with parts of the self without coinciding with them, as is done in Voice Dialogue. Recognizing the Inner Critic, by paying attention to *how* something is being said and by using body language to express how the Critic manifests himself (Leijssen, 1995), is also found in Voice Dialogue. By becoming more aware of the protective function of the Critic, the interaction with him becomes different, creating more understanding and kindness in the process. Another key element is restoring contact with the 'experiential self' (compare it to making contact with the vulnerable and disowned selves). The importance that is given to transforming the Inner Critic varies from author to author. In EFT, they work towards transformation by initiating a dialogue between the Critic and the 'experiential self'. Even when this does not happen, and instead some other partial aspect begins to play a less dominating role, it can still bring about changes. Weiser Cornell (2005) points out that the radical acceptance of the Inner Critic is crucial.

Common to these approaches is the dialectical constructivism: describing the self as a dynamic system of multiple parts of the self which are in constant contact with each other. This dynamic is fully present in every human being, and becoming more aware of these partial aspects leads to more inner balance.

Learning to work with Voice Dialogue

Voice Dialogue may look simple, but it requires thorough training and gaining quite some experience. Early-stage facilitators have the tendency to conduct rather rational interviews with subpersonalities, preventing the subpersonality from maturing and, therefore, the client from experiencing the underlying

vulnerability. Sometimes there is also the tendency to switch over to the disowned selves too quickly and to lose sight of the importance of discovering and separating from the primary selves.

The more experience a facilitator gains in working with this method, the better she will be able to align herself with a subpersonality. The more a facilitator can empathize with a subpersonality's, the more inviting she is and the more actively she can listen, the more a subpersonality will feel seen and heard.

Voice Dialogue is a layered method which is best learnt through observation, by undergoing your own sessions and by practicing as a facilitator. The postures and conversation techniques known from focusing and from emotion-focused therapy are very useful here. In the Netherlands, there are a number of very thorough Voice Dialogue courses, given by teachers who were trained by Hal and Sidra Stone. You can find an overview of the literature in the Reading Room on Hal and Sidra Stone's website, www.voicedialogue.org. A number of these articles were also published in The Voice Dialogue Anthology.

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Notes

¹ This contribution was written after the workshops the author gave to client-centered psychotherapists during regional meetings in Eindhoven (2012) and Utrecht (2013) in the Netherlands.

² For readability purposes, I use 'he' to refer to the client and 'she' to refer to the facilitator.

³ Many thanks to the editors for drawing the connection between Voice Dialogue and client-centered psychotherapy.