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Dialogical coaching: An experiential approach to personal and professional development.

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Abstract

Coaching practice is dominated by discussion. This is at odds with theories of cognition and adult learning which emphasise experiential processes in stimulating beneficial changes in thought, feeling, and behaviour. In this practice-focused article, we make the case for an integrative and experiential approach to coaching which is informed by dialogical self theory ('dialogical coaching'). This is followed by a series of vignettes which illustrate the dialogical coaching process. Conceptually, dialogical coaching views the mind as being composed of dynamic parts ('I-positions') which are capable of engaging in harmonious, conflictual, or imbalanced relationships with one another. Practically, dialogical coaching aims to bring about transformations in the dialogical mind through the use of enactive procedures collectively referred to as 'chairwork'. Examples of how chairwork might be applied to common coaching issues forms the focus of this paper, including work-related stress, decision-making, interpersonal conflicts, skills training, professional transitions, and personal growth. Evidence which supports and informs dialogical coaching is presented alongside future directions for research.

Keywords: chairwork; coaching; dialogical self theory; experiential; integrative

What's it mean? Implications for consulting psychology

Many coaching issues can be understood in terms of problematic interactions between parts of the self ('I-positions') occurring within the dialogical mind. Dialogical coaching aims to resolve these conflicts through 'here-and-now' dialogues between I-positions, principally through the medium of 'chairwork'. In line with theories of cognition and learning, we suggest that this active and experiential approach to coaching may be advantageous due to its memorability, novelty, and capacity to bring about enduring cognitive-affective changes.

Introduction

Coaching seeks to help individuals identify, define, and work towards meaningful goals and aspirations through the application of established psychological approaches and interventions (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). Despite its recent emergence, coaching frameworks have proliferated over recent years, establishing an increasingly heterogeneous intervention science (Mennin, Ellard, Fresco, & Gross, 2013). In parallel with this expansion, growing attention has been paid to which theoretical frameworks and coaching methods are most effective in facilitating personal and professional development (Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006). Whilst demonstrably effective (Jones, Woods, & Guillame, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014) and rooted in evidence-based models (e.g. cognitive-behavioural theory), most practitioners would agree that leading models of coaching sometimes produce disappointing outcomes. How, and why, might coaching practice be going awry?

The ‘aboutist’ approach to coaching

Questions and conversations lie at the heart of coaching (Whitmore, 2017). Consequently, coaches often find themselves engaged in analytic (and often dispassionate) discussions *about* clients’ presenting concerns. Unfortunately, this rather inactive stance risks disappointing results: talk-based coaching may succeed in bringing about change at an intellectual level (cognitive ‘insights’) but not an emotional or behavioural level, for example (a gap termed the ‘head-heart lag’) (Stott, 2007). Given that memory for consultations is often poor and short-lived (Bober, Hoke, Duda, & Tung, 2007; Lee & Harvey, 2015), clients may also struggle to recall, implement, or elaborate upon the content of coaching sessions (referred to as ‘parking lot syndrome’). Fredrik (‘Fritz’) Perls, the founder of gestalt therapy, was one of the first to rally against this ‘aboutist’ trend: “We talk about it and talk about it, and nothing is accomplished” (Perls, 1969, p.36). To avoid the trap of talking *about* one’s problems without resolution, gestalt therapy (and psychodrama before it) seeks to translate clients’ thoughts and

feelings into transformative experiences in the here-and-now. Both of these approaches are well-known for their use of enactive, role-playing procedures - collectively known as 'chairwork' - which seek to bring "the individual's action system right into the room" (Polster & Polster, 1973, p.234). Chairwork is renowned for being amongst the most powerful methods of psychological intervention and one which has the potential to enhance coaching practice (Rowan, 2010, 2019).

A call to action

Modern coaching increasingly defines "significant moments of therapeutic change as experientially intense... Commentary may be necessary, but not sufficient for inducing a significant shift" (Neimeyer, 2004, p.114). A growing body of literature also supports the value of experiential and 'action-packed' approaches to change. Cognitive theory, for example, indicates that multisensory methods are advantageous both in terms of modifying the dysfunctional cognitive structures underlying distress (e.g. maladaptive thoughts and beliefs) and constructing functional mental representations which are preferentially retrieved in-situ (e.g. adaptive thoughts and beliefs) (Teasdale & Barnard, 1993; Brewin, 2006). Relatedly, theories of information-processing suggest that the immersive and evocative interventions enhance the memorability of new knowledge (Pugh & Margetts, *in press*; Tangden & Borders, 2017), while models of adult learning underscore the importance of experiencing and experimentation in driving personal development (Kolb, 1984).

To summarise, leading approaches to coaching are reliant on passive-analytic methods (e.g. discussion, questioning, analysis, and reflection). Theoretical literature, on the other hand, suggests that learning and development should incorporate the head ('talking'), the heart ('experiencing'), and the hands ('doing'). Accordingly, we suggest that an active-experiential manner of coaching may be more productive, memorable, and transformative. What theoretical framework could guide such an approach?

Theoretical basis

Dialogical self theory

Individuals adopt a multitude of roles in their both professional lives (e.g. I as ‘manager’, ‘ambitious’, ‘hardworking’) and personal lives (I as ‘mother’, ‘adventurous’, ‘chilled-out’) (van Loon, 2017). Moreover, many - if not all - of these roles are enacted in both the external and internal world. Dialogical self theory (DST) conceptualises the self as being composed of autonomous parts, referred to as ‘*I*-positions’¹ (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Each *I*-position represents a transient facet of personality which possesses its own unique thoughts, feelings, motivations, memories, and goals. Accordingly, DST envisions the mind as akin to a complex ‘multi-voiced society’, with *I*-positions functioning like the characters in a story (Hermans, 2002). References to this ‘multi-mind’ are remarkably common in everyday language, evidenced in statements such as “a part of me thinks that...” and “I’m in two-minds about...”. Furthermore, research has confirmed that individuals often experience their thoughts and feelings as dialogical and ‘voice-like’ (Moritz, Klein, Berger, Laroi, & Meyer, 2019; Stiles, Osatuke, Glick, & Mackay, 2004). Seen in this light, *I*-positions provide the structure and content of individuals’ self-narratives and meaning frameworks (Goncalves et al., 2019).

In terms of organisation, DST suggests that *I*-positions are subject to relational dynamics (e.g. agreement, conflict, cooperation) and power dynamics (e.g. dominance, subservience), as well as external influences including familial, professional, social, and cultural norms. Over time, certain *I*-positions come to dominate the dialogical mind (‘core’ or ‘primary’ *I*-positions), while others are made peripheral or disowned. Relatedly, *I*-positions are arranged horizontally and vertically, with some self-parts residing at lower levels of conscious awareness than others (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). It should also be noted that the dialogical

¹ Other literature has used different terms to describe these components of personality, including voices, selves, subpersonalities, mindsets, and modes of information-processing.

self extends beyond self-referential, 'internal' *I*-positions (e.g. 'I as employee', 'I as optimist') and includes internalised representations of other persons ('external' or 'other-in-the-self' *I*-positions) (e.g. 'my father', 'my supervisor', 'my manager'), as well as collective *I*-positions (e.g. 'my organisation', 'my nationality') (Krotofil, 2013).

Notions of 'self-multiplicity' are apparent in numerous models of coaching, including cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, and gestalt approaches. Accordingly, DST offers a 'meta-theory' for bridging models of psychological functioning and a common 'meta-language' for psychological processes. Dialogical models of the self have also amassed an impressive evidence-base and are supported by a body of cognitive, linguistic, and neuroscientific research (e.g. Klein & Gangi, 2010; Kramer, Meystre, Imesch, & Kolly, 2016).

Originally developed within the field of personality psychology, DST has since been applied within the intervention sciences (Konopka, Hermans, & Goncalves, 2019). DST conceptualises psychological dysfunction in terms of disharmonies within the dialogical self. A taxonomy of common 'dialogical dysfunctions' has recently emerged (Table 1) (Hermans, 2004; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2002; Neimeyer, 2004). These include *tyrannical dialogues* in which distressing *I*-positions dominate the internal world; *uniform dialogues* characterised by stereotyped interactions between a limited number of *I*-positions ('*I*-prisons'); *conflictual dialogues* involving disagreement between *I*-positions; *disorganised dialogues* in which *I*-positions are poorly differentiated or press to be heard simultaneously; and *dissociated dialogues* in which *I*-positions are avoided or suppressed - a process evidenced by unvoiced internal dialogues ('silent stories'). Traumatic experiences (e.g. unexpected losses) may also result in *disrupted internal dialogues* due to the disappearance of *I*-positions, potentially obstructing the processing of such events.

Dialogical dysfunction represents just one area of concern for DST. Healthy psychological functioning is defined in terms of *I*-positions which are accessible, flexible, and

Table 1

Forms of dialogical dysfunction

Dialogical dysfunction	Within-session marker	Exemplar client statement
Tyrannical or monolithic dialogues	Internal dialogues which are dominated by single <i>I</i> -positions, e.g. persistent self-criticism or worry.	<i>“Colleagues say I don’t recognise my successes at work. It’s true that I constantly put myself down”.</i>
Uniform dialogues	Movement between a very limited number of stereotyped <i>I</i> -positions.	<i>“My approach to work is either boom or bust. I postpone projects until the last minute or spend too long sweating the details”.</i>
Barren dialogues	An absence of <i>I</i> -positions in the dialogical mind.	<i>“I don’t feel anything when I think about retiring. It’s just a deep emptiness inside of me”.</i>
Conflictual dialogues	Persistent conflict between polarised <i>I</i> -positions.	<i>“A part of me is excited about the opportunity to change careers, but another part of me wants to stay in my current role”.</i>

Disorganised or cacophonous dialogues	Internal dialogues which are confused, unclear, or perplexing, e.g. ‘mixed feelings’ about events.	<i>“The thought of being promoted brings up all kinds of emotions in me. I don’t know what to feel about it”.</i>
Dissociated dialogues	Avoidance, denial, or disownment of I-positions.	<i>“Colleagues say I ought to feel annoyed about my manager’s behaviour, but I don’t allow myself to get angry about it”.</i>
Silent stories	I-positions which are unvoiced or unexpressed.	<i>“Being the CEO means being strong for the company. No-one really knows how overwhelmed I feel at times”.</i>
Disrupted dialogues	Unresolved internal dialogues, e.g. grief, resentment, and unexpressed hurts.	<i>“I can’t get over the way I was dismissed from my last job. I go over and over the redundancy meeting in my mind”.</i>

varied, alongside modes of self-to-self relating which are fluid, cooperative, and creative (Hermans, 2004; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Accordingly, DST also emphasises the development of functional *I*-positions. These include healthy *I*-positions which support well-being, such as the wise mind (Linehan, 2015), healthy adult mode (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003), and rational self (Dryden, 1995). Equally important are ‘meta-observing’ *I*-positions which bring coherence, reflectivity, and decentred self-awareness to the dialogical self (e.g. ‘I as non-judgmental witness’) (Dimaggio, Hermans, & Lysaker, 2010; van Loon, 2017)². Related concepts include mindful awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), the observing self (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012), and witness state (Stone & Stone, 1989). Finally, ‘promoter’ or ‘helper’ *I*-positions are regarded as being crucial to growth, innovation, and healing in the dialogical mind (e.g. ‘I as wise’) (Rowan, 2019). Exemplar promoter *I*-positions include the compassionate mind (Gilbert, 2010), best possible self (King, 2001), and spontaneous self (Moreno, 1987). While coaching frameworks vary according to the relative importance attributed to each category of functional *I*-position, DST places equal emphasis on cultivating self-parts which support adaptive functioning (e.g. rational thinking), metacognitive abilities (e.g. self-reflection), and personal growth (e.g. self-compassion). Each plays a central role in dialogical practice.

Developmental influences

Humans are born into a world which is fundamentally dialogical (Bertau, 2004). Developmental research indicates that the foundations of the dialogical self are apparent from early infancy and arise from the non-verbal exchanges between parent and infant during

². These meta-positions are closely related to, but distinct from, ‘transcendent *I*-positions’ which enable a continuous process of self-experiencing which is unconstrained by temporal or spatial boundaries. For example, ACT defines ‘self-as-context’ as the arena within which ongoing experience arises (“the continuous you which observes the interplay of *I*-positions before, during, and after the present moment”), while Voice Dialogue refers to a not dissimilar ‘aware ego process’.

prelinguistic stages (Fogel, de Koeyer, Bellagamba, & Bell, 2002). Over time, social developments such as shared perspective-taking ('joint attention') and conversational turn-taking lead to the internalisation of more elaborate dialogical exchanges between 'self' and 'other' (Bertau, 2004). Certain *I*-positions eventually dominate the landscape of the mind, particularly those which support the fulfilment of basic needs (e.g. maintaining connection to caregivers) and are valued by the wider social system; what have been referred to as 'core' or 'primary' *I*-positions (Raggatt, 2012; Stone & Stone, 1989). In contrast, *I*-positions which are ineffectual, devalued, or which compromise functioning are disowned, avoided, or suppressed.

Evolutionary influences

Evolutionary theory highlights distal influences on the dialogical mind, suggesting that the emergence and interplay between *I*-positions reflect competencies which have enabled humans to survive and thrive. Social mentality theory (Gilbert, 1989), for example, argues that humans have evolved distinctive 'mindsets' which support the acquisition of biosocial goals (e.g. reproduction, hunting, territorial defence) and, relatedly, the performance of particular social roles (e.g. hostile or cooperative relating to others). To illustrate, competitive mindsets associated with securing and protecting access to life-supporting resources draw upon specific patterns of attention, cognition, behaviour, and emotion which are markedly different to caregiving mindsets linked to child-rearing. Gilbert and colleagues (2007) go on to suggest that, in humans, social mentalities operate not only in the context of external (self-other) relationships but also internal (self-self) relationships. Self-criticism, for example, could be conceptualised as a dominant-subordinate form of self-relating in which one part coerces another part. Self-compassion, on the other hand, describes a more care-focused style of self-to-self relating characterised by intrapersonal warmth and safeness. These points suggest that the emergence of *I*-positions and their interplay may stem, in part, from humans' evolutionary heritage.

A dialogical approach to coaching

Dialogical coaching is an active-experiential approach to coaching which is informed by DST. Conceptually, dialogical coaching understands clients' presenting concerns in terms of discordance within the dialogical mind and/or the absence of functional dialogical processes. Practically, dialogical coaching is an integrative approach which seeks to transform these disharmonies, alongside the cultivation of more adaptive dialogical processes, through the use of action-based, dialogical interventions. Technically, dialogical coaching prioritises the use of these experiential methods due to their ability to stimulate enduring, and sometimes rapid, transformations in the dialogical mind.

Chairwork: The dialogical method

It seems natural that a dialogical approach to coaching should embrace a dialogical method. 'Chairwork' refers to a collection of experiential interventions which utilise chairs, their positioning, and movement between them to concretise and modify dialogical events in the here-and-now. First used within the psychodrama approach one century ago (Moreno, 1987), chairwork acquired greater appreciation through gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969), before undergoing rigorous empirical scrutiny within emotion-focused therapy (Greenberg, 2015). Chair-based methods are now used in numerous psychological therapies including cognitive therapy (Pugh, 2019a,b), compassion focused therapy (Gilbert, 2010), acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes et al., 2012), motivational interviewing (Pugh & Salter, 2018), and positive psychotherapy (Pugh & Salter, *under review*; Tomasulo, 2019). Descriptions of how chairwork is applied in coaching frameworks have recently been presented (e.g. Daniels, 2019; Anstiss & Gilbert, 2014; Rowan, 2010; Whybrow & Allan, 2014).

Noted previously, theories of adult learning and cognition suggest that experiential procedures such as chairwork are a potent means to bring about enduring changes in thought, feeling, and behaviour. From a pragmatic standpoint, chairwork offers coaches a flexible method for differentiating, concretising, and animating *I*-positions, thereby enabling

individuals to engage with parts of the self in novel (and often transformative) social-relational ways. Procedurally, the process of enactment enables the client and coach to enter into the dialogical mind, both as witnesses and active agents for change, in the here-and-now. Experientially, chairwork anchors growth, learning, and new experiences of the self in embodied and emotionally-salient experiences.

Forms of dialogue

Multiple and overlapping categories of chairwork have been described (Table 2). At its most basic, chairwork seeks to facilitate dialogues between internal *I*-positions (i.e. self-to-self dialogues) or external *I*-positions, sometimes referred to as others-within-the-self (i.e. self-to-other dialogues) (Ho, 2012; Kellogg, 2015). Paradigmatic chair-based procedures include *empty-chairwork* (imaginal dialogues with an ‘other’ held, symbolically, in an empty chair); *multi-chairwork* (speaking from several chairs representing different perspectives or parts of the self); and *role-playing* ([re-] enactments of past, present, and future interactions). More recently, Kellogg (2019) has presented a ‘four dialogue matrix’ of core enactments: single chair interventions which involve speaking from the perspective of a unitary *I*-position (‘giving voice’); single chair interventions involving the disclosure of unspoken events and experiences (‘telling the story’); two-chair dialogues between internal *I*-positions (‘internal dialogues’); and two-chair dialogues involving internalised representations of other persons (‘relationships and encounters’).

Existing taxonomies of chairwork emphasise exchanges of information between *I*-positions (‘horizontal dialogues’). However, cultivating a distanced perspective on the dialogical mind plays an equally important role in bringing coherence and innovation to the self. For example, standing during chairwork enables individuals to relate to *I*-positions from observational ‘meta-’ positions (‘decentring’). Similarly, manipulating the arrangement of chairs helps individuals externalise the landscape of the mind and concretise its unique

Table 2

Forms of dialogue

Horizontal dialogues	
Giving voice	Single chair interventions involving the expression of unitary <i>I</i> -positions.
Telling the story	Single chair interventions involving the expression of silent <i>I</i> -positions.
Internal dialogues	Multi-chair interventions involving dialogue between two or more self-referential <i>I</i> -positions.
Relationships and encounters	Multi-chair interventions involving dialogues with other-referential <i>I</i> -positions.
Vertical dialogues	
Decentring	Distanced observation of <i>I</i> -positions represented by chairs.
Mapping	Chair-based compositions representing the dialogical mind.

configurations, coalitions, and constellations of *I*-positions ('dialogical mapping'). For instance, feelings of vulnerability (*I*-position/chair one) may 'sit behind' one's self-criticism (*I*-position/chair two). 'Vertical dialogues', therefore, represent an equally important category of chairwork.

The dialogical process: An illustrated overview

The following section illustrates the process of dialogical coaching, which usually proceeds through a series stages: the development and presentation of an initial formulation as to the *I*-positions implicated in the client's presenting issue(s); concretising *I*-positions through the use of chairs; animating *I*-positions through personification or embodiment; selecting an appropriate dialogical intervention on the basis of the initial hypothesis; facilitating dialogue between *I*-positions; and achieving transformation.

Greg was referred for coaching by his line manager because of his inability to 'switch off' after work, resulting in a preoccupation with assignments and growing exhaustion.

Formulation

Dialogical coaching begins with a formulation or hypothesis as to which *I*-positions are related to the client's presenting issue. Two key questions for the dialogical coach are: "Who, in this individual's dialogical mind, is interacting with whom when this issue arises?", and secondly, "What is the nature of their interaction?" (i.e. conflict, cooperation, competition, etc.). Often, clients' statements about their concerns will contain explicit or implicit references to relevant dialogical processes (referred to as 'dialogical markers'), indicating that a dialogical method of intervention may be useful (see Table 1).

Greg's coach hypothesised that his difficulties disengaging from work might be linked to a 'pushy' I-position. Greg concurred, stating that he experienced a near-constant internal pressure to keep working, even when he was away from the office.

Self-multiplicity

Next, chairs representing relevant *I*-positions are introduced. Clients are usually encouraged to experiment with the arrangement and distance between chairs so that they match the landscape of the mind as accurately as possible.

Greg's coach introduced two empty seats into the consulting room space: one chair representing his 'pushy side' and another chair representing his 'exhausted side'.

Embodiment and personification

Once *I*-positions have been concretised by chairs, they next enlivened. Indeed, if dialogues between *I*-positions are to take place, these parts of the self-part must be imbued with a capacity to convey information (i.e. to 'speak') and receive information (i.e. to 'listen'). *I*-positions are animated in two ways. *Embodiment* involves the client moving into the seat of an *I*-position and speaking as that part of themselves. Alternatively, *personification* involves the client imagining the salient characteristics of the *I*-position as if it were sat in the empty chair (e.g. its gender, facial expression, posture, and tone of voice). Generally speaking, embodying *I*-positions produce more evocative experiences of chairwork, while personification creates distance from *I*-positions and down-regulates affect.

Embodiment: Greg was asked to change seats and enact his pushy I-position (chair one). He then proceeded to berate his exhausted I-position (chair two) about a lack of productivity ("You're not allowed to stop... There's too much to do... You can sleep when your inbox is empty").

Personification: *Greg was asked to imagine what his pushy I-position would look like if it were held in chair one. Greg described seeing a cold, stern-looking headmaster sat in the seat opposite him.*

Dialogue

If chairwork represents the means of dialogical coaching, dialogue between *I*-positions represents its end. As noted, these dialogues take two principal forms: exchanges of information between *I*-positions ('horizontal dialogues') or the development of meta-observational perspectives on dialogical events ('vertical dialogues').

Horizontal dialogue: *After enacting his pushy side, Greg moved to chair two and responded as his exhausted side. This I-position described feeling crushed and overwhelmed by the demands of the pushy side.*

Vertical dialogue: *Having spoken from the perspective of his pushy and exhausted I-positions, Greg was invited to stand up and observe events in his dialogical mind from a distanced perspective.*

Transformation

To inform the intervention that follows, an important question for the dialogical coach is, "Which dialogical processes or *I*-positions might resolve this issue?" Adaptive changes in the dialogical mind take several forms. These 'dialogical transformations' include the following.

Consolidation: The strengthening of existing *I*-positions which support adaptive functioning.

After speaking from the perspective of his pushy and exhausted I-positions, Greg moved to a third chair representing his 'rational side'. With the support of his coach, Greg was encouraged to challenge the demands of his pushy side from the 'rational' seat (Coach: "Tell the demanding side why the things it's saying are unreasonable and unhelpful").

Cultivation: The development of new, adaptive *I*-positions (typically promoter *I*-positions).

After voicing his pushy and exhausted I-positions, Greg was invited to move to a third chair representing his Compassionate Self. Because this I-position was relatively unfamiliar to Greg, his coach provided suggestions as to what the salient qualities of his Compassionate Self might include (e.g. strength, openness, warmth, etc.). Greg then proceeded to embody these features, enabling him to respond to his pushy and exhausted sides productively and authentically.

Internalisation: The conscious introjection of adaptive *I*-positions which are modelled by the coach (including the internalised-coach-as-temporary-*I*-position).

When Greg struggled to counter-argue with his pushy I-position, his coach offered to enact this 'healthy' I-position on his behalf. Standing beside Greg's chair, the coach proceeded to set boundaries with his pushy side (Coach: "May I speak to the pushy side? [Greg nods]. You need to stop putting pressure on Greg. He needs to rest"). The process of modelling was repeated several times until Greg was able to counter-respond on his own.

Reconciliation: Establishing collaborative dialogues between previously conflicted *I*-positions.

Remaining in the exhausted chair, Greg was prompted to share the distress he experienced as a result of his pushy I-position (Coach: “Tell the demanding side how much you’re suffering because of its demands. What do you need from that side of yourself?”). Switching seats again, Greg’s demanding side proceeded to soften in response to this emotive outpouring, setting the stage for a more cooperative dialogue between these I-positions.

Assimilation: The recognition, expression, and integration of *I*-positions which have been avoided, suppressed, or disowned.

After speaking from the perspectives of his pushy I-position (chair one) and exhausted I-position (chair two), Greg was asked to notice if other I-positions pressed to be heard. Greg observed that an unfamiliar ‘rebellious side’ stirred within him. After changing seats (chair three), the coach proceeded to interview this disowned I-position in regards to its developmental origins (Coach: “How long have you been a part of Greg for, Rebellious side?”), manifestations (Coach: “Where and when do you show up in his life?”), and attitude (Coach: “What do you make of these pushy and exhausted sides of Greg [gestures to chairs one and two]? How do you think he ought to approach his work?”). Greg later reflected on how much he enjoyed reconnecting with his rebelliousness.

Innovation: The spontaneous emergence of innovative *I*-positions as the result of any of the aforementioned dialogical processes.

Facilitating dialogues

Process-skills refer to the momentary interventions which coaches utilise to ensure that chairwork is as immersive, evocative, and productive as possible (Pugh, 2019a). In dialogical terms, these interventions play an important role in keeping *I*-positions clear, distinctive, and fully elaborated during their enactment (Kellogg, 2015). Given that chairwork tends to be

effective when it is emotionally evocative (Greenberg & Malcolm, 2002), these skills also ensure that affect is raised to a productive level during dialogues. A summary of core process skills is provided in Table 3.

Some skills warrant additional discussion. Firstly, research suggests that chairwork is most effective when *I*-positions are voiced in different chairs as opposed to the same chair (Delavechia, Velasquez, Duran, Matsumoto, & de Oliveira, 2016). Accordingly, coaches prompt clients to change seats as they move between *I*-positions (Coach: “*Now that we’ve heard from the part of you that wants to diversify the company, switch chairs and speak as the part that does not*”). It is not uncommon for *I*-positions to intrude upon an unfolding dialogue. If this occurs, the client is asked remain in the role of the self-part being voiced (Coach: “*We’ll hear from the side that wants change in a moment [gestures to the second chair] but, for now, let’s stay with the part that doesn’t want change*”). Alternatively, if *I*-positions push to be heard, the client is asked to change seats and adopt that perspective (Coach: “*It sounds like the part that wants change is pretty strong right now - would you like to change seats and be that side?*”) (Kellogg, 2015).

Some *I*-positions require elaboration during chairwork, particularly those who are quiet, hesitant, or unfamiliar. Emergent *I*-positions can be deepened in three ways: offering the *I*-position a statement to repeat (‘feeding a line’; Kellogg, 2015) (Coach: “*If it fits with your experience, try saying...*”); temporarily speaking on behalf of the client’s *I*-position (with the client’s permission) (‘doubling’; Moreno, 1987); or inviting the client to voice an *I*-position with greater openness and conviction from a second position (‘self-doubling’; Kellogg, 2015).

Finally, it should be noted that *I*-positions relate not only to cognitive events but also non-verbal aspects of experiencing (Konopka et al., 2019). Accordingly, clients are encouraged to give voice to all aspects of their experience during chairwork, including emotional responses (Coach: “*If your sadness could speak, what would it say?*”), bodily states (Coach: “*Speak as*

Table 3

Process skills in dialogical coaching

Process skill	Description	Example
Clarity	The voices of <i>I</i> -positions are kept clear and distinct throughout the dialogue.	<i>“In this chair, I’d like to speak only as your Anxious Self”.</i>
Doubling	The coach temporarily speaks on behalf of the client’s <i>I</i> -position.	<i>“May I speak on behalf of this part? [Coach stands beside client]. As your rational side, I’d like to say...”</i>
Embodiment	The client is invited to adopt salient characteristics of <i>I</i> -positions (e.g. their posture, expression, tone).	<i>“What facial expression might go with your compassionate side? Try doing that”.</i>
Expressing needs	Encouraging <i>I</i> -positions to state their unmet needs and wants from other <i>I</i> -positions.	<i>“Rather than constantly berating you, what do you need from this critical part of your self?”</i>
Feeding lines	Offering the client statements to repeat in order to expand or amplify what <i>I</i> -positions have conveyed.	<i>“If it fits with your experience, try saying the following...”</i>
Guiding attention	The coach ensures that the client’s attention remains focused on the dialogical encounter throughout.	<i>“Rather than saying that to me, trying saying it to your boss [gestures to the empty chair]...”</i>

Imagery	The client explores visual characteristics of personified <i>I</i> -positions as a prelude to dialogue.	<i>“How do you picture the vulnerable side of your self? [Gestures to the empty chair]”</i>
Movement and separation	When <i>I</i> -positions emerge, the client is prompted to locate these in new seats or switch chairs.	<i>“It sounds like the part which doesn’t want to change jobs is speaking now. Change seats and be that side”.</i>
Non-verbal communication	The client is encouraged to put words to <i>I</i> -positions which manifest in non-verbal communication.	<i>“I notice your foot tapping as you speak. What is your foot saying?”</i>
Presencing	Statements which stress the reality of chairwork and the dialogical encounter.	<i>“Let’s get to know your determined side a little better. Change seats and <u>be</u> that side of your self”.</i>
Praise	The coach encourages the client, particularly in response to key or transformative statements.	<i>“Good... Well done... That’s great”.</i>
Repetition	The coach prompts the client to repeat key statements to help build conviction and/or amplify affect.	<i>“What you just said to your demanding side is important. Say it again”.</i>
Role reversal	The client exchanges roles with the ‘other’ by moving into their chair and speaking from that perspective.	<i>“Change seats. [Client switches]. Now, respond to what you just said from your manager’s perspective”.</i>
Scene-setting	The coach elicits particular details about the scenes in which external dialogues have, or will, take place.	<i>“Let’s transport ourselves back to your manager’s office. What’s around us? What time of day is it?”</i>

Self-doubling	The client is asked to stand behind their chair and speak with more candor.	<i>“Would you stand behind your chair? From this place, tell your colleague what you <u>really</u> feel about them”.</i>
Specificity	<i>I</i> -positions are encouraged to be as specific as possible in their statements.	<i>“You sound frustrated, Inner Critic. Tell this individual what it is about them that annoys you”.</i>
Speech and tone	Selective adjustments to the client’s rate and tone of speech, e.g. prompts to repeat key statements louder.	<i>“Say that again, but 20% louder this time”.</i>

the dropping sensation in your stomach”), and gestural-postural events (Coach: “I notice you’re slumping in your seat - how does that relate to what you’re thinking and feeling right now?”) (Greenberg, 2015; Perls, 1969).

Dialogical coaching in action

Coaches who are familiar with chairwork will be aware that the exercises described thus far take inspiration from a variety of approaches. Mirroring the pan-theoretical ethos of DST, dialogical coaching integrates dialogical procedures drawn from multifarious orientations. These include psychodramatic, gestalt, cognitive behavioural, schema-focused, compassion-focused, motivational, voice dialogue, and ‘positive’ approaches to coaching and chairwork (Pugh, 2019a). Examples of dialogical procedures which might be applied in coaching practice are now presented.

“Where do we start?”

The issue. Lee’s organisation has agreed to fund coaching sessions to support his transition into a leadership role. He begins the initial consultation by outlining the most pressing challenges he faces: reducing staff absence, resolving a longstanding conflict between two departmental managers, and drafting an operational policy. Overburdened by the magnitude of these tasks, he is unsure what the consultation ought to address first.

The dialogue. Representing each of Lee’s objective with a different chair helped concretise and create distance from these challenges (Chesner, 2019). In order to better understand the issues at hand, Lee was next asked to occupy each seat and give his objectives a voice (Coach: “*Lee, take the seat of ‘Staff Absence’.* [Lee changes seats]. *So, ‘Staff Absence’, tell Lee about yourself.* [Gestures to Lee’s former seat]. *What does he need to know about you?*”). Lee then returned to his original chair and described his immediate thoughts, feelings, and intentions towards each challenge (Coach: “*Reverse back.* [Lee returns to his chair]. *So, you’ve heard what ‘Staff Absence’ has to say. How do you respond?*”). Through this process

of dialogue, Lee acquired new ‘action-insights’ (Kellerman, 1992) into the nature and relative importance of each objective. Reorganising the layout of chairs to reflect their priority, he was then able to select a suitable focus for the session.

“I can’t decide”

The issue. Sara has been offered a more senior role overseas. While she thinks that this will be an excellent opportunity for her progression, she is unsure about whether she wants to relocate.

The dialogue. Sara’s coach suggested using two-chair decisional balancing to resolve her dilemma (Pugh & Salter, 2018). This involved Sara voicing her reasons to change jobs in chair one (Coach: “*Beginning with the side that does want to change roles, state your reasons for accepting this post as passionately as you can*”), followed by the reasons to remain in her current post in chair two (Coach: “*Now, change seats and speak from the other perspective. [Sara moves to chair two]. From this chair, what are the reasons for not accepting this post?*”). Sara proceeded to move back-and-forth between these seats, responding and counter-responding from each perspective, until she felt more decided about what the next step should be.

“I need some advice”

The issue. Luke has managed a small team for the last six months and needs to give some difficult feedback as part of the company's annual performance review process. He has approached his coach for guidance on how he might navigate this situation.

The dialogue. Luke’s coach suggested conducting an ‘imaginal survey’ of individuals who could provide insights on this issue, albeit in fantasy (Pugh, 2019b) (Coach: “*Let’s get some advice on how to provide this feedback. If you could consult with three people - dead or alive, real or imagined - who would you choose?*”). Luke was then asked to enact each of these persons in different chairs in order to solicit their advice. To ensure that Luke was sufficiently

‘warmed-up’ to enact each role, the coach initially ‘interviewed’ him in each character (Blatner & Blatner, 1991) (Coach: “*Change seats. [Luke switches]. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Warren Buffett. Tell me about yourself. Why do you think Luke choose to seek advice from you? What skills and experiences do you bring to an issue like this? What guidance can you offer him in terms of providing his team with feedback?*”).

“I lack confidence”

The issue. Jane’s manager has arranged access to a coach to help build her confidence at work. During the first meeting, it becomes clear that Jane is highly critical of her performance.

The dialogue. In order to better understand the nature and content of Jane’s self-criticism, her coach invited her to change seats and ‘speak as’ her inner critic (Coach: “*Change seats and be your critical self. [Jane moves to chair two]. Speaking as the inner critic, tell Jane [gestures to chair one] about how poor her performance at work is*”). Returning to her original seat, Jane described feeling beaten-down and demoralised by these attacks. With the support of her coach, Jane then practiced counter-responding to her inner critic from a third ‘healthy’ chair (Coach: “*Tell the critical side [gestures to chair two] why the things it says are untrue and unhelpful*”) (Arntz, Bernstein, & Jacob, 2013; Pugh, 2019a).

“What am I good at?”

The issue. Chloe has been working in marketing roles for the last eight years. She wants to explore how she can use her knowledge and skills in other areas of the business but needs clarity on what her strengths are.

The dialogue. Chloe’s coach is quick to notice the creativity that she brings to her work. Drawing upon the voice dialogue approach (Stone & Stone, 1989), her coach suggested that they ‘get to know’ this character strength a little better. To do this, Chloe was asked to change seats and speak as her creative side. Her coach then proceeded to interview this *I*-position in

regards to its nature (Coach: *"Tell me about yourself, Creativity - where do you show up in Chloe's life?"*), origins (Coach: *"When did you come into Chloe's life? Do you take after anyone she has known?"*), and signature strategies (Coach: *"How do you help Chloe be creative? What techniques do you use?"*). Once elaborated, Chloe's creative side was invited to offer advice regarding her work-related concerns (Coach: *"As you know, Creativity, Chloe [gesturing to her former chair] is thinking about seeking experience in other areas of the company. Do you have any advice about that? How could you support her in achieving this goal? In what areas of the business would you feel happiest?"*).

"Something is holding me back"

The issue. Maria has been working long hours to balance her day job and a passion project. The latter has now become very profitable, but something is holding her back from resigning from her day job.

The dialogue. Resolving this 'block' involved Maria visualising her resistance as if it were held in an empty chair (Coach: *"Imagine the part of you that is stopping you from resigning were held in this seat. [Gestures to the chair]. What do you see?"*). Maria was surprised to imagine a small child sat before her. Next, Maria was encouraged to speak directly to her resistance and, after switching chairs, to respond as her resistance (Rowan, 2019). Maria shuttled back-and-forth between the chairs several times, speaking as her 'passionate side' and her 'vulnerable side', until the nature of her hesitance became clearer (Maria: *"I'm scared I won't be able to support myself without a stable job"*).

"I need some support"

The issue. Annie is regarded as a high performer by her senior management team. Unfortunately, she has recently been involved in several high-profile but unsuccessful pitches. Concerned about her morale and increasing volume of errors, Annie's supervisor has linked

her in with an in-house coach. Now doubting her competence, Annie is clearly in need of support and encouragement.

The dialogue. Annie's coach proposed that they construct an 'inner champion' to help provide her with the resources needed to perform to her best ability. This began with Annie changing seats and embodying the outward characteristics of her inner champion, including its posture (strong, centred), manner of breathing (relaxed, smooth), facial expression (relaxed, half-smiling), and voice tone (calm, assured). Next, Annie was asked to closed her eyes and to adopt the inward characteristics of her champion, including its qualities (e.g. strength, wisdom) and motivations (e.g. to comfort and encourage) (Gilbert, 2010). Once immersed in this role, Annie then practised dialoguing with herself from this supportive *I*-position (Coach: "*When you're ready, open your eyes and bring your inner champion with you. Looking at Annie through the eyes of this champion [gestures to Annie's previous chair], what guidance and encouragement do you think she needs right now? What would you like her to know and understand about her abilities? How can Annie call upon you when she feels disheartened or overwhelmed?*").

"Where am I going?"

The issue. Kunal has changed careers several times since graduating. While his current managers are positive about his performance, he does not feel that he has found his true calling.

The dialogue. Kunal was asked to imagine possible versions of his 'future self' in different empty seats (e.g. 'I as in the same role', 'I as studying again', 'I as volunteering in another country') (Baumgardner, 1975). Looking at these existential options from a standing ('meta') position, Kunal noted that some appeared more attractive than others. His coach then invited him to take the seat of his most compelling 'future selves' and describe their lived experience in the here-and-now (Pugh & Salter, 2018) (Coach: "*Let's get to know the version of Kunal who decides to return to university. [Kunal changes seats]. Nice to see you again,*

Kunal. A year has passed since we last met and now you're studying again. How's that going? Are you enjoying yourself?"). After embodying several of these future selves, Kunal concluded that he experienced himself as happiest and most fulfilled as an overseas volunteer.

“I can't move on”

The issue. Aaron's former colleague often took the credit for successful joint projects. Moreover, Aaron has recently learnt that this individual has been promoted. Feeling resentful about this undeserved achievement, Aaron finds himself ruminating about his colleague's success. This is beginning to impact on his performance and well-being at work.

The dialogue. Aaron's coach suggested using an empty-chair dialogue to resolve this “unfinished business” (Perls, 1969; Greenberg, 2015). Facing an empty seat, Aaron was invited to confront his former colleague as if this individual were sat in the chair before him (Coach: *“Imagine James is here with us today. [Gestures to the empty chair]. How do you feel seeing him again? Tell him about the emotions you have carried since you worked together”*). After expressing his anger and hurt, Aaron then switched seats and responded from the perspective of the ‘other’ (Coach: *“Change seats. [Aaron moves to the empty chair]. James, you have heard how much Aaron has suffered because of your actions. What do you say in response?”*). After several rounds of role reversal, ‘James’ offered a heartfelt apology for the distress he had caused, enabling Aaron to begin letting go of his lingering feelings.

“I don't understand them”

The issue. Dipali has considerable experience working with challenging personalities but is struggling to understand one of her clients. This individual's combative attitude during negotiations seems entirely unwarranted and has begun to sour their working relationship.

The dialogue. To better understand the nature of Dipali's relationship with her client, her coach suggested recreating one of their interactions. This involved Dipali enacting herself while the coach enacted the client. After this initial role-play, her coach suggested reversing

roles so that Dipali might experience the perspective of the ‘other’ (Moreno, 1987) (Coach: *“This time, I’d like you to play the role of your client. [Dipali and her coach swap seats]. As we talk, try to get a sense of what it feels like to speak from this position”*). Role-play was paused intermittently to help Dipali clarify the thoughts and feelings of her client (Coach [speaking to Dipali-as-client]: *“Greg, you seem a little annoyed right now. Do you have a sense of what’s frustrating you?”*). Having experienced the interaction from her client’s point of view, Dipali felt more aware of the pressures this individual faced during negotiations. Holding this new understanding in mind, Dipali found that her subsequent interactions with the client were more productive and collegial.

“I’ve got mixed feelings”

The issue. Michael is the CEO of a large company. He has been looking forward to retirement for some time but, with only one month of work remaining, he feels increasingly uncomfortable about this prospect. His organisation has arranged access to a coach to support his transition out of work.

The dialogue. ‘Multiple selves’ (Gilbert, 2010) allowed Michael to acknowledge, validate, and manage his conflicted feelings about retirement. Four chairs were introduced into the consulting space, each representing a primary emotion (i.e. Michael’s ‘Sad Self’, ‘Anxious Self’, ‘Angry Self’, and ‘Excited Self’). Michael then spoke from the chair of each emotion, describing associated thoughts (Coach: *“Speaking as ‘Anxious Self’, what does this part of you think about retiring?”*), motivations (Coach: *“If ‘Anxious Self’ was in complete control, what would it have you do?”*), physiology (Coach: *“Where does ‘Anxious Self’ first show up in your body?”*), and memories (Coach: *“What does ‘Anxious Self’ remember when you think about retiring?”*). Michael’s relationship with each I-position was also explored (Coach: *“Which of these selves are you most comfortable with? What is hardest to acknowledge?”*), as well as the relationships between I-positions (Coach: *“What does ‘Excited Self’ think about ‘Sad Self’?”*).

Towards the end of the dialogue, Michael moved to a fifth chair representing his ‘Compassionate Self’ and guided in providing his emotional selves with support and containment (Coach: *"Looking at these selves from the perspective of your ‘Compassionate Self’, in what ways do they make sense given your life experiences and the challenges of retirement? What does each self need in order to settle? Can you say that to them?"*).

“How do I do that?”

The issue. Lucy feels micromanaged by her team leader and believes this limiting her productivity. She is considering confronting this individual in order to improve the situation but lacks the assertiveness skills this requires.

The dialogue. Rather than providing instruction on being assertive, Lucy’s coach proposed using a ‘contrasted role-play’ (McNeilage & Adams, 1979) so that she might discover her natural assertiveness skills. To begin, Lucy imagined that her manager was sat in an empty seat (chair one). Next, Lucy moved to chair two and role-played approaching her manager in a submissive manner. Moving to chair three, Lucy was then encouraged to confront her manager in the most aggressive way possible. Finally, Lucy moved to chair four and practised speaking to her manager in a way that combined the politeness of chair two with the strength of chair three. Lucy agreed that this assertive ‘middle-ground’ between passivity and aggression not only felt most comfortable, but was most likely to succeed.

“I’ve never shared this before”

The issue. Following a company restructure, Emma was forced to make several individuals in her department redundant. One year later, she continues to struggle with considerable guilt. Due to her senior position, she has been unable to share this ‘silent story’ with any of her colleagues.

The dialogue. Emma imagined a line drawn across the consulting room floor, representing the months before, during, and after the company restructure. Walking along this

imaginal timeline, Emma proceeded to recount her experience of the company restructure in real-time (Dayton, 2016). At significant moments in her story, Emma was asked to move to the other side of the line and speak as relevant individuals, including her past self (Coach: “*Cross over the line and be Emma as she is deciding who in the department should be dismissed. [Jane stands on the other side of the timeline]. Describe what you’re going through right now*”). Returning to her original position, Emma was then invited to support and advise these past versions of her self (Coach: “*Cross back over the line. [Emma returns to her former position]. As your current self, what would you like to say to Emma back then? [Gestures to where ‘past Emma’ was standing]. Knowing how much she is struggling with these decisions, is there anything you want her to understand?*”).

Evidence-base

Dialogical coaching is yet to be formally evaluated. However, sufficient evidence does exist to hypothesise that it offers a useful framework for coaching. An increasing body of research indicates that chairwork is an effectual method of intervention (see Pugh, 2019a, for review). For example, qualitative studies suggest that chair-based techniques are distinguished by their memorability, transformational power, and ‘felt truth’ (Chadwick, 2003; Robinson, McCague, & Whissell, 2014). Moreover, clients often rate chairwork as more productive than other methods of intervention, such as discussion and ‘thought challenging’ (Bell, Montague, Elander, & Gilbert, 2020). In terms of quantitative research, several chair-based procedures have shown demonstrable effectiveness. These include empty-chair techniques for resolving ‘unfinished business’ (see vignette “I can’t move on”) (Paivio & Greenberg, 1995), two-chair techniques for facilitating decision-making (see vignette, “I can’t decide”) (Clarke & Greenberg, 1986), and role-playing techniques stimulating perspective-changing and empathy (see vignette, “I don’t understand them”) (Kipper & Ritchie, 2003). Studies are now needed to determine the effectiveness of dialogical coaching, as well as its coherence and utility.

Discussion

Given the abundance of frameworks at their disposal, why should coaches consider a dialogical approach to their work? We have argued that current coaching practice is dominated by models which prioritise talking over doing. Consistent with theories of learning and cognition, these inactive approaches often yield dissatisfactory outcomes: questions and answers only go so far in terms of stimulating growth and strengthening performance. Integrative models look beyond the confines of single schools to enhance the efficacy and applicability of coaching (Fernandez-Alvarez, Consoli, & Gomez, 2016; Passmore, 2015). In this article, we have presented one such integrative approach which is grounded in the principles of DST. Dialogical coaching seeks to both assimilate the wisdom of leading coaching models and maximise their potential through action-focused, experiential procedures. Furthermore, dialogical coaching is grounded in a language which honours human complexity and resonates with clients' self-multiplicity.

The basic premise of this article has been that evolutionary and developmental processes have shaped a human mind which is composed of dialogical parts or *I*-positions. Accordingly, clients' presenting concerns can be understood in terms of disharmonies and imbalances in this 'multi-mind'. We propose that DST offers a coherent framework for conceptualising these issues. Theoretically-informed and supported by a growing evidence-base, we have gone on to argue that chairwork offers a medium *par excellence* for stimulating dialogical change. In practice, dialogical coaching integrates chair-based procedures drawn from a variety of approaches to resolve clients' presenting issues in flexible, creative, memorable, and effective manner.

Dialogical coaching is not without limitations. Experiential approaches to coaching remain at the peripheries of mainstream practice, although this is changing (e.g. Neve-Hanquet & Crespel, 2019; Postlethwaite, 2019). While integrative coaching models are advantageous

in terms of their scope and applicability, they are also demanding (Passmore, 2015): dialogical coaching requires a good working knowledge of multiple enactive procedures and the theoretical frameworks which inform them. For clients, the invitation to action may depart from their expectations of coaching, sometimes generating apprehension or skepticism. Dialogical coaching is also an emotive process which may sit uncomfortably with some individuals. However, these issues do not mean dialogical coaching should be abandoned: clients' concerns will often dissipate once dialogues are underway. Coaches also have a number of options available to them when obstructions arise (see Pugh, 2019a). Practical issues such as restricted space, limited chairs, or coaching via telecommunications do not preclude dialogical coaching either: standing in different locations or re-orientating a single chair is often sufficient to separate *I*-positions and facilitate dialogical exchanges.

This article has centralised chairwork in dialogical coaching. While the strength of these procedures lies in their immediacy, flexibility, and growing empirical support, chairwork is not the only means to facilitate dialogical practice: imagery, expressive writing, and surrogate objects offer alternative mediums for symbolising, expressing, and dialoguing with *I*-positions (Lengelle, 2016; Schwartz & Swezey, 2019). It must also be reiterated that chairwork is a potent tool for bringing about change. As Blatner (1996) notes, powerful tools necessitate considered application; chairwork demands judgement and competency on behalf of coaches in order to work safely and responsibly.

While DST and chairwork are both well-established, dialogical coaching is still very much in its infancy. Research is needed to determine its efficacy, coherence, and acceptability to both coaches and their clients. In addition, studies are needed to inform and fine-tune its implementation: which chairwork procedures are most effective, for which individuals, with what presenting issues (or dialogical dysfunctions), in which personal or professional contexts? In the meantime, we hope the ideas and procedures presented here will encourage coaches to

do more and say less in their meetings. In words of Jacob L. Moreno, the invitation to clients is to show us, rather than tell us, what brings them to our door.

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