Hermans, Hubert J.M., & Hermans-Jansen, Els, *Self-narratives: The construction of meaning in psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford, 1995. 306 pp. ISBN 0–89862–878–4, US$ 35.00.

As stated in the authors' preface, this book is a

> ... common project of two authors who entered it from quite different perspectives, one as a researcher and personality theorist interested in the psychology of motivation and the other as a practitioner interested in the question of how to motivate people to explore their own life in greater depth and bend it into a more fruitful direction. (p. x)

This definition of the book's focus is followed through in the text in a number of ways. First, for its authors, it constitutes a synthesis of a specific kind of theory of human self (valuation theory) with rich phenomena that are elucidated through the use of the 'self-confrontation method' in the process of psychotherapy. Valuation theory is based on the work of William James, yet developed by Hubert Hermans in his theoretical work in multiple ways beyond the insights of that great forefather of most of psychology (Hermans, 1991, 1995; Hermans & Bonarius, 1991a, 1991b; Hermans & Kempen, 1995; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). The person is the constant constructor of his or her self, in dialogue with him- or herself, as well as with others. The latter include researchers of self, because they may trigger or intensify ongoing self-construction processes. All construction of self entails generation of meanings because those reorient the person's making sense of the self. The latter entails unity of semiotic and affective processes—and it is within those processes that the raw material for Hermans's valuation theory emerges.

Valuation theory's central concept—*valuation*—entails

> ... anything people identify as a relevant meaning unit when telling their life narrative. A valuation is any unit of meaning that has a positive (pleasant), negative (unpleasant), or ambivalent (both pleasant and unpleasant) value in the eyes of the self-reflecting individual. It can include a broad

range of phenomena: a precious memory, a difficult problem, a beloved person, an unreachable goal, the anticipated death of a significant other, and so forth. Through the process of self-reflection, in dialogue with oneself or another person, valuations are organized into a single narratively structured system. (p. 15)

It should be noted here that the book is almost fully dedicated to the procedures of empirical analysis. This is encoded into the compositional structure of the book—valuation theory itself is presented in a relatively few pages (chapter 1: 'The Person as Motivated Storyteller', and chapter 2: 'The Self as an Organized Process of Meaning Construction'—a total of 24 pages in the whole book). Even though there are episodic returns to relevant facets of the theory in later chapters (e.g. discussion of dreams, myths and the multi-voicedness of self in chapter 5, relations between processes of dissociation and dysfunction—as well as dialogicality of self—in chapter 6), the book remains primarily a testimony to the empirical extendability of the theoretical orientation that Hubert Hermans has been developing since his move away from construction of tests of achievement motivation at the end of the 1960s (Preface, p. ix).

Second, the work reported in this book constitutes a synthesis of introspective–qualitative and extrospective–quantitative orientations in psychological methodology. This is evident in the method. The 'self-confrontation method' entails two steps of data derivation, which are purposefully kept temporally adjacent to each other. At the first step, the given task triggers the person's introspection into different areas of his or her life (e.g. questions about personal past, present and future, e.g. 'Is there anything in your present existence that is of major importance to you or exerts a significant influence on you?'). The person's narrative answers include specifiable valuations (externalized form of introspection)—which are subsequently rated (by the person him- or herself) using a six-point rating scale (from 0 to 5) for 16 (or more) affect terms (e.g. joy, self-esteem, happiness, worry, strength, etc.). This self-evaluation represents the authors' borrowing from traditional psychology's method construction practices. Such borrowing is further evident when the affect ratings are further classified into four superordinate categories (*self-enhancement*, *desire for contact* with others, *positive affect*, *negative affect*), and *sums* of ratings within each category become used as indices for the given quality. Even correlation coefficients are made into an interpretative tool, when relationships within individual profiles of the four self-characteristics are analyzed further. Traditional notions of psychological measurement find their *gezellig* place in a person-oriented, idiographic analysis of persons'

narration of their self-worlds. The authors' 'methodological dialogue' between idiographic analysis orientation (which provides the book with the touch of remarkable closeness to psychological phenomena) and the traditional instrumentarium of psychology (the general tradition of which has been to alienate data-fascinated psychologists from the complexity of their original phenomena) is surprisingly harmonious in this book. Possibly this is a side-effect of the main focus of the text—a careful exposition of the empirical method. This allows the authors to devote relatively few pages to the usually critical question of validation that haunts any idiographic perspective, because its opponents habitually raise the flag of yet another crusade against 'soft psychology', using the armor of traditional psychometrics. In the reviewed book, the authors spend only seven pages (pp. 47–54) on the exposition of their innovative general idea of what validation (and invalidation) process means in person-centered (and -inclusive) psychological research—before escaping into an empirical example. Dialogue with the person should validate the method. Empirically, that is indeed clear, but theoretically it need not (yet) be so. The coverage may be sufficient for the purposes of the book, yet it remains in need of careful theoretical elaboration in its own terms.

Third, the book entails a dialogue between the practical social concerns of clinical psychologists (e.g. the prevention and detection of psychological dysfunctions), and the theoretical affordances of valuation theory. The latter necessarily allows for any kind of idiographic self-structures to be constructed by any person. Some of those structures may lead to psychological dysfunction, but others need not. That the categories of dysfunction are social constructions, and hence historical particulars, is recognized by the authors (pp. 164–165).

Thus, valuation theory itself may allow for a wider picture to be painted here: *some* of the constructed valuation structures may *prevent* the transition to states of dysfunction, while others may facilitate it. Valuation theory needs to allow for personal construction of self-protective structures—aside from possible moves from dissociation to dysfunction (as discussed in chapter 6). The very first person-oriented 'psychotherapist' is the person him- or herself—who works toward overcoming emerging psychological 'problems' *at the same time* as those 'problems' are themselves coming into existence.

The story here may be similar to that constructed in modern immunology. There, interestingly enough, theoretical opposition of 'self' and 'non-self' contrasts has proven productive in understanding the flexibility of biological functioning (see Löwy, 1992). If the 'dialogicality' of organism's <ANTIBODIES ↔ NEW VIRUSES> relationship

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allows for both health (i.e. successful avoidance of the infection) and illness (e.g. experiencing yet another version of influenza), then psychological analyses of the processes that lead to self's *dys*functioning should entail a parallel (and equal) focus on the self's normal functioning, as well as its resilience.

This equality of focus may be obtainable in a general theory of self, but not in its application in the social institution of clinical psychology. Clinical psychology has to presume the existence of psychological problems, or at least of the realm of risk for their potential emergence. Hence the preponderance of clinical psychology toward perceiving the trajectories of possible transitions from different forms of dissociation (e.g. *omission* of relevant information from self-narrative, *fragmentation* of the system of valuations, *subduing* of the affective coloring of a valuation and *distortion* of the self-narrated story) to psychological dysfunction. Such transitions are implied in the descriptive materials in chapter 6. However, the possible complementary process of the forms of dissociation creating 'protective shields' against transition to dysfunction—that is, development of psychological strength through dissociation (see Strümpfer, 1995, for a treatment of 'fortigenesis')—is given scant (if any) attention. Persons seem to be constantly in dialogue with their potential 'fall' into the realm of dysfunction, rather than just functioning under the present circumstances.

In a similar vein, the authors' narration of the life-long development story of the self (chapter 7) is built in accordance with all the traditional 'myths' of psychology (e.g. the need for a secure attachment, the role of peers, the 'delicate balance' of competition and cooperation, adolescent romantic love, midlife transformations, etc.), with implications that lack in any or all of those features may lead to dysfunctions. It is the common sense—that is, shared ordinary wisdom—that leads to practical questions about how to 'balance' reward and punishment, cooperation and competition, materialism and idealism, in bringing up children.

Traditionally, psychology has utilized the models of 'balancing' opposites as if those were exclusive of one another. Hermans's theoretical thought in other publications (Hermans, 1995), as well as traces of it in the book under review (e.g. pp. 9–10, where Bakhtinian dialogicality is emphasized), is a good example of overcoming such narrative constructions (for other efforts of a similar kind, see the recent discussion of 'individualism'—'collectivism' in this journal: Allik & Realo, 1996; Matsumoto, Kudoh, & Takeuchi, 1996).

Nevertheless, there is no consistent reconstruction of the usual story of human development in chapter 7 that could be based on valuation

theory. Perhaps there is a good reason for that, given the compositional needs of the book. This part of the book where the usual story is told may link the authors' original empirical work with received narrative practices of contemporary child and life-span developmental psychology. Still, valuation theory itself may be a powerful tool for making sense of the value-laden narratives that we persistently create about human development from the ideological social-institutional position as psychologists, educators, and the like. Our construction of stories of 'healthy' human development is selectively oriented by such role positions. Perhaps the constructivistic ethos of valuation theory can benefit from explication of these constraints, set by persons assuming their social roles. *Social roles may reduce the flexibility of the person's narrative constructions in ways similar to that of personal-psychological dysfunction.*

Valuation theory may benefit from working out potential relations between social role-based and dysfunction-based inflexibilities. As an example, let us consider two forms of dysfunction—'grandiosity' and 'limitlessness'. As outlined in the book,

> Grandiosity can be seen as a dysfunctional exaggeration of success and autonomy. In psychology this exaggeration is most typically represented by the more excessive expressions of the achievement motive, probably the most well-known and best investigated motive in the history of our field. (p. 178)

> The concept of 'limitlessness' refers to an inability or unwillingness to perceive or accept realistic limitations on both the self-enhancement and the contact and union motive. In this case of dysfunction the two motives have become intermingled and fused and produce a lack of differentiation within the valuation system. Limitlessness will often manifest itself as a tendency to extend the self to its utmost. (p. 182)

Both of these kinds of *self-dys*functions can be observed to be socially facilitated in different societies, as expected social norms (rather than personal dysfunctions). I myself migrated away from the social acceptance of the grandiosity of the 'Soviet personality' (successful in its social tasks—fused with the then-still-glorious meaning of 'the Soviet society'). However, as an immigrant to the United States, I entered into an environment in which a person's limitlessness (not to speak of grandiosity!) was (and is) an equally socially promoted ideal, rather than a personal dysfunction.

Surely it is persons who relate to these socio-institutionally promoted ideals through their self-constructive systems, resulting in a wide variety of versions of acceptance, rejection or neutralization. When psychology as science is scrutinized, however, we can observe

the implicit acceptance of some of these suggested ideals into theoretical constructions, which (not surprisingly!) become widely popular in the dialogue of science and society. The construction of 'internal' and 'external' locus of control ideas in American psychology since the 1950s (with the valuation of the 'internal' locus set up to dominate over the 'external' one) and the slowness which these have been replaced with a systemic—or dialogical—view on control belief issues (see Weisz, Eastman, & McCarty, 1996) is perhaps the most visible example. A socially promoted valuation was made into an axiomatic starting base for a general psychological issue. Further social fortification of the concept by an empirical method (a standardized scale) guaranteed that the focus on limitlessness become encoded in the know-how of psychology as science.

When science becomes implicitly guided by the valuations promoted by social institutions, it is in danger of becoming a vehicle for social renegotiation processes of objectives other than knowledge construction. The case of psychotherapeutic practices is different in its needs. Psychotherapy depends upon narratively constructed meanings of persons assuming social roles in the institutions of society. Psychotherapists cannot take a neutral position in this dialogue between their social role-based positions and their institutional interlocutors (i.e. social institutions of governments or religious establishments). General meanings (such as 'well-being' or 'psychological health') are instrumental in the organization of the life and work of the role-bearers of psychotherapists or 'medical professionals' at large, who are to benefit from the proliferation of such meanings within a society. Such proliferation—when resulting in the institutional appropriation of the meanings—creates the basis for the given practice. The book includes all the necessary information for potential practical uses of the self-confrontation method (including the manual).

The readers of *Culture & Psychology* would of course expect the crucial question to be asked about the book—where is 'culture' in it? Explictly, it is nowhere—the authors do not discuss the cultural embeddedness of self-valuation processes at any length (with the occasional exceptions where persons' narratives include references to cultural folk models, e.g. p. 162). Yet, the *whole* of the material covered in the book is one of the best examples of cultural psychology in its research (and practical) action. All the valuations constructed by persons, jointly with the therapists, are examples of co-constructive externalization of personal cultures (Valsiner & Lawrence, 1996). Aside from the wealth of practical examples of how one can study personal valuation structures, the reader will gain a general insight into how

one can construct novel traditions of psychological research that unite theoretical and empirical sides of that process, with care for the phenomena, and rigor in the derivation of the data. The book is a refreshing voice among sometimes all-too-general discussions that nowadays are subsumed under the labels of 'cultural', 'sociocultural' or 'social constructionist' approaches in psychology. When complemented with a well-developed theoretical companion book on the issue, it would constitute a major advancement in the psychology of the self.

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