

# Going Back To Their Roots: Maintaining Continuity in the Dialogical Self through Signs

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In this article we argue that the societal-level change caused by the creation of cultural contact zones from increased immigration has implications for nationals' cultural identities. We propose that the resultant instability of cultural I-positions demands the development of identification strategies in the Dialogical Self (Hermans, 2001a) to enable the individual to maintain identity continuity. The focus involves a detailed textual analysis of two case studies of Irish nationals, investigating one identification strategy used: the "I as an Old Irish Person", and the sign-use it employs. Using insights from Cultural Continuity Theory (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), this article discusses the relevance of societal-level processes to the Dialogical Self (Hermans, 2001a).

## SELF AND CULTURE: THE NEED FOR CONTINUITY

Aristotle's claim that living things have "a principle of change and staying unchanged" (cited in Wiggins, 1980, p.88-89) is a natural paradox of human life. Over the course of development, individuals must come to understand the inherent contradiction that we are "as we were, and yet different" (Hermans & Salgado, 2005, p.10). The understanding of this paradox is a personal and collective imperative: without links to who you were and who you will be, life would lose meaning, future planning would make no sense, and because no one could be held accountable for their past actions, society would cease to function (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). Given the dire consequences if continuity was not to be appreciated, individuals must come understand that they are self-same over the course of time: numerically just one person, yet continuously changing and developing.

Despite its necessity, the comprehension of one's continuity is not guaranteed or innate and can be threatened by radical personal or cultural change (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). While investigating suicidal youth, Ball and Chandler (1989) found that the concept of personal persistence offered a great insight. The authors hypothesised that if an individual lacks an understanding of their self-continuity and simultaneously experiences an event that triggers suicidal thoughts, they would be particularly vulnerable to considering suicide as a viable option. This vulnerability occurs because the individual will have no meaningful connection to their past, but more importantly, no meaningful connection to their future self. The connection between suicide and the lack of continuity was evident in the result that among the 400 adolescents who took part in the various studies (Ball & Chandler, 1989; Boyes & Chandler, 1992; Chandler, 1994; Chandler & Lalonde, 1994), the only group who could not justify their self-continuity were the suicidal adolescents. 80% of the psychiatrically-hospitalised actively-suicidal adolescents, failed to reasonably validate that they were just one

person. The suicidal adolescents were no less verbal than the two control groups in trying to find a personally acceptable validation, but unlike their non-suicidal counterparts, they were unable to offer any reason to explain why they or someone else would still count as and be the same person in the face of radical change. This would explain why the individuals who experienced suicidal thoughts were able to consider, and opt for, suicide, because without an understanding of their own continuity, they lost the psychological connection between their past, present, and future. Without that connection, there was no meaningful attachment to the dead person in the future.

This innovative work was expanded by Chandler and Lalonde (1998) to investigate the adolescent suicides of British Columbia's First Nations, whom have highest suicide rates of any culturally identifiable group in the world (Kirmayer, 1994). The investigators soon found that the rate of suicide across the approximately 200 cultural bands which make up the First Nations is not uniform, and therefore suicide is not an Aboriginal problem, but one belonging to particular bands. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) found that because the continuity of a culture forms a critical support for identity formation, the extent to which a culture connects, or not, to its traditional past and future was indicative of the community level of youth suicide rates.

The support for this claim lies in six devised markers. Through various investigations, Chandler and Lalonde found that the factors which influenced "cultural continuity" were (1) self-government; (2) community control over police and community protection services; (3) control over health services; (4) control over educational services; (5) whether land claim negotiations had been initiated; and, (6) the existence of a community cultural centre. The bands that possessed these six markers of cultural continuity had little or no youth suicides. Those with less, or had none, had suicides rates of up to 800 times the national average.

The work of Ball and Chandler (1989) and Chandler and Lalonde (1998) show that suicidal individuals display a lack of self-continuity, and that communities with high levels of suicide exhibit a lack of cultural continuity. Despite these strong findings, cultural continuity remains relatively untested but has the potential to explain and predict other social problems which depend on temporal connectedness. While it is not completely clear how "cultural continuity" relates to "self-continuity", the implications of the results are that situations which undermine the continuity of a culture can have severe individual and social effects because cultures have a temporal dimension and need to be understood by their members as connected to the past and future, despite certain change and development.

In more recent writing, Chandler and Lalonde (2008) emphasise that psychological impacts are "necessarily magnified when the cultural backcloth against which development naturally unfolds is unravelled by social-cultural adversities" (p.70). Being that there are strong links between individual and cultural continuity, disruption to a culture's continuity can have a great individual level impact. We suggest in this research that the development of a cultural contact zone, the result of globalisation and immigration, is one such social-cultural difficulty that will present a challenge to cultural continuity at the individual level. It is hypothesised that contact with large numbers of culturally, ethnically, and religiously different others will have the effect of

breaking the temporal connections of the Irish culture for Irish nationals at the individual level.

We claim in this paper that the experience of uncertainty at the individual level is an outcome of broken cultural continuity. Uncertainty is not by definition a negative experience, but if it is intensified, uncertainty can lead to anxiety and insecurity (Hermans, 2007) because “the human being does not tolerate the uncertainty towards the future and searches for stability” (Duarte, Rosa, & Gonçalves, 2006, para. 19). To combat uncertainty, individuals can develop identification strategies (Abbey, 2006; Hermans, 2001b; Onishi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003; O'Sullivan-Lago, Abreu, & Burgess, under review) to protect, restore, and maintain continuity.

### **The Cultural Contact Zone Context**

Ireland is a new cultural contact zone. Traditionally Ireland was a country of mass emigration but the economic revival of the 1990s caused a dramatic turnaround and introduced the new experience of mass immigration. In the ten years between 1995 and 2005, Ireland's foreign-born population increased from 2.7% to 11.4% (OECD, 2007; O'Sullivan-Lago et al., under review) and the Central Statistics Office now identifies immigration as “the dominant factor” for population increase (C.S.O., 2007).

Due to mass immigration, this previously homogeneous culture is experiencing cultural change on a grand scale (MacÉinrí, 2005, 2007) and makes an ideal location for identity research. We hypothesise that Ireland's development from a homogenous culture to a cultural contact zone will cause a break in cultural continuity for the nationals and therefore have a great impact upon their identities. The sudden presence of the cultural other in this formerly homogeneous culture will have the effect of placing the individuals' Irish cultural identity and values under scrutiny and, in so doing, render them less secure (Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 1995). Uncertainty in identity is extremely difficult for humans to negotiate (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005) and therefore individuals develop strategies to resolve uncertainty and protect continuity (Abbey, 2002; Hermans, 2001b; Onishi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003). To reduce the uncertainty caused by broken continuity, the “I” can move from the unstable position guided by the imagined future to positions which are seen to be most viable (Abbey, 2006). We expect that societal-level change and the presence of cultural others, will cause a break in the Irish national's cultural continuity and the resultant uncertainty for the cultural future will need to be alleviated through the use of an identification strategy in the Dialogical Self.

### **The Dialogical Self in Cultural Contact Zones**

Opposing the traditional conception of the Cartesian self, Hermans and Kempen (1993) have theorised that the self is multiple, complex and contextual. Dialogical Self Theory recognises “history, body and social environment as intrinsic features of a developing person localised in time and space” (Hermans, 2001b, p.28), identity is viewed as constructed in dialogical and narrative terms, interdependent with the cultural context (for a detail description see Hermans, 2003). Combining Bakhtin's (1973) metaphor of the polyphonic novel and James' (1890) distinction between the I (self-as-subject) and Me (self-as-object), the Dialogical Self is unified yet multiple. In its theoretical

formulation, the dialogical self is composed of a collection of different, sometimes opposed, internal and external positions which the “I” can move among (Hermans, 2001a). The “I” can “imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established” (Hermans, 1996, p.11) and the specific position occupied by the “I” can change from one moment to the next.

In an age of globalisation and immigration, societal-level processes and their impact on identity are becoming increasingly important. While Hermans and Salgado (2005) assert that the self exists in a context and that “the *I* emerges by reference with an Other” (2005, p.10), Abbey and Falmagne (2008) have argued that the theoretical formulation of the Dialogical Self is limited by the relative absence of the societal-level processes of social constitution. To investigate the relationship between these process and the dialogical self, cultural contact zones, the spaces created by globalisation where previously unconnected cultures come into contact, offer an ideal opportunity for research. The aim of the present article, therefore, is to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between societal-level processes and individuals’ identities, using insights from cultural continuity theory. The study will also investigate how identity strategies function by examining one identification strategy and its sign-use. Two mini-case studies of Irish nationals will be presented and explored in detail.

### **Maintaining Continuity Through Signs**

Individuals can use different identification strategies to maintain continuity because “the open systemic nature of development guarantees that the same developmental process can take place through more than one simple route” (Valsiner, 2000, p.14). In this paper we will focus on one identification strategy and investigate the different functions of it through its use of signs.

Signs represent objects: they can be point-like and stable (“a table”) or open and field-like, incorporating meaning (“criminal”) (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005). Signs are constantly used by human beings because they are an essential to psychological functioning (Valsiner, 2001). Signs are involved in solving psychological problems and link the individual to their world and to their future (O’Sullivan-Lago & Abreu, under review; Valsiner, 2007). The function of signs as being future-oriented is particularly crucial for individuals facing changing life circumstances to aid them during the psychological processes of deciding to act one way or another, processes which are filled with uncertainty (Valsiner, 2007).

The current study will concentrate on the “field like”/meaning-laden signs used by these individuals. Field-like signs have open boundaries for meaning and function as tools which help reduce uncertainty for the future (Valsiner, 2002). Studying the use of signs can help us understand how dialogical identification strategies operate to maintain continuity because individuals use meanings to prepare themselves for the future and actively interact with the world in which they exist. To examine the sign use, we will use a method of analysis adapted from Abbey and Valsiner (2005)’s experimental paper.

## **EXAMINING DIALOGICAL IDENTIFICATIONS AND THEIR SIGNS**

To investigate how the dialogical self responds to societal-level change, the present study is a microanalysis of what identification strategies do to maintain continuity when faced with an uncertain cultural future. The interviews utilised here are part of a larger study investigating cultural identity and continuity maintenance in Ireland.

The transcripts were first coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2006) for I-positions by identifying how the individuals were positioning themselves at the time of speaking. This included self-identifications and also statements that constituted expressions of positions, for example, *"It's just not right! Irish culture is "The Wolftones". That's what Irish people are meant to sing!"* was coded as the "I as an Old Irish Person" identity position.

To investigate the sign-use of the dialogical identity positions, the method used in Abbey and Valsiner's (2005) experimental study was adapted. All meanings are created in reference to the past and future, emerging through tension and dialogue, therefore moments of intense uncertainty were sought in the text. The participants' speech was interpreted for signs, and the passages were divided by changes in the signs used by the identification strategy to represent self and other.

The analysis presents extracts from semi-structured interviews with two Irish nationals: "Dermot" (aged 42) and "Sarah" (aged 38), in Cork, a large urban area in Ireland where immigration is particularly new (MacÉinrí, 2005). The current analysis makes no claims regarding the frequency with which this particular identification strategy is used but it is an interesting and useful one to help theorize on the phenomena of strategy and sign use.

### **The Dialogical Self's Strategy Use**

It was evident in the data that the nationals were experiencing an individual-level break in their individual-level cultural continuity. This was displayed by high levels of cultural uncertainty. Many identification strategies were coded in the data, but the dialogical identification strategy that will be discussed here is the "I as an Old Irish person" identity. This identity position was used by the participants as a strategy which rejected "Modern Ireland", the cultural contact zone, and all of the corresponding cultural change. The strategy restores continuity by attempting to maintain and reinstate the cultural past. The strategy allowed Dermot and Sarah to restore, albeit artificially, their individual-level cultural continuity.

The present analysis considers just two excerpts, chosen to illustrate the function of the strategy. The first extract was selected to illustrate the use of the strategy due to a feeling of alienation because of cultural change and the second was chosen to demonstrate the use of the strategy to reject the cultural other.

The extracts presented here will be marked numerically to indicate changes in the sign use in the speech of the individual. The analysis which follows will correspond to the sections numbered with the signs marked in capitals.

## **Dermot**

Dermot's use of the "I as an Old Irish person" was used to explain his distance from Modern Ireland and Irish people:

*(1) When I think of Irishness, I mean the Ireland I grew up in was the Ireland of the Eighties and (2) I guess everyone knew each other; (3) no one had very much advantage over the other. (4) I enjoyed the Eighties even though we had nothing but (5) it was very much a helping, you know, friendliness (6) that has just stopped existing, that has stopped existing...(7) I think what's happened now is that the differences are getting stretched out and (8) people are classifying themselves according to a new spectrum and (9) if you're not successful – it's a bit like America that if you're not successful (10) you have to find out where you are on that spectrum (11) and it's like that web is gone. That thing that was propping you up in the Eighties was part of this sort of Irishness that (12) we all felt we were part of the same thing and (13) I guess that's being tested now because we have wealth now (14) and there are people coming in (15) that we mistrust to some degree and (16) the Irishness that I remember was always a friendliness, a closeness... (17) and now suddenly we've changed. (18) I suppose it's hard to explain it. (19) I definitely, for one, am still lost in the Eighties because I felt more comfortable with the way things were. I feel, apart from the fact that (20) everyone's changing, the traffic, the feeling that (21) everyone wants to achieve more and more and (22) they don't have time, quality time. (23) I don't like all that. I liked the relaxing times and (24) I struggle in this modern era. (25) Despite the fact that I have a very good job, better than I would have had back then, and I have a fairly high standard of living, (26) I'm not comfortable in this era we're living in.*

The uncertainty aroused by the break in cultural continuity causes Dermot to move from his cultural I position to a specific "Old Irish" cultural position. He presents Old Ireland, the Ireland of the 1980s, as AUTHENTIC (section 1), following to emphasise the COMMUNITY aspect of that culture (section 2) and its inherent EQUALITY (section 3). Despite the POVERTY of the Old Ireland (section 4) the characteristic COMMUNITY is more important to Dermot (section 5). These community values are viewed as lacking in Modern SELFISH Ireland (section 6) and it is now DIVIDED (section 7). Dermot emphasises the COMPETITIVE aspect of Modern Ireland (section 8), which he feels is OVER-AMBITIOUS (section 9) and promotes INEQUALITY (section 10). Returning to discuss Old Ireland, Dermot stresses the SUPPORTIVE characteristic (section 11) he feels is absent in Modern Ireland, along with Old Ireland's EQUALITY (section 12). WEALTHY Modern Ireland (section 13) is in stark contrast to Old Ireland due to the prosperous economy but also IMMIGRATION (section 14) which has made the Modern Irish SUSPICIOUS (section 15). The COMMUNITY of Old Ireland (section 16) has

suddenly CHANGED (section 17) and become UNCERTAIN (section 18). The FAMILIAR Old Ireland (section 19) is favoured over the CHANGING Modern Ireland (section 20) which is OVER-AMBITIOUS (section 21) and too BUSY (section 22). The RELAXED Old Ireland is presented as preferable (section 23) to the DIFFICULT modern era (section 24) despite its PROSPERITY (section 26) because he is UNCOMFORTABLE with the changes.

### **Sarah**

Sarah's use of the "I as an Old Irish person" was used to reject the cultural other:

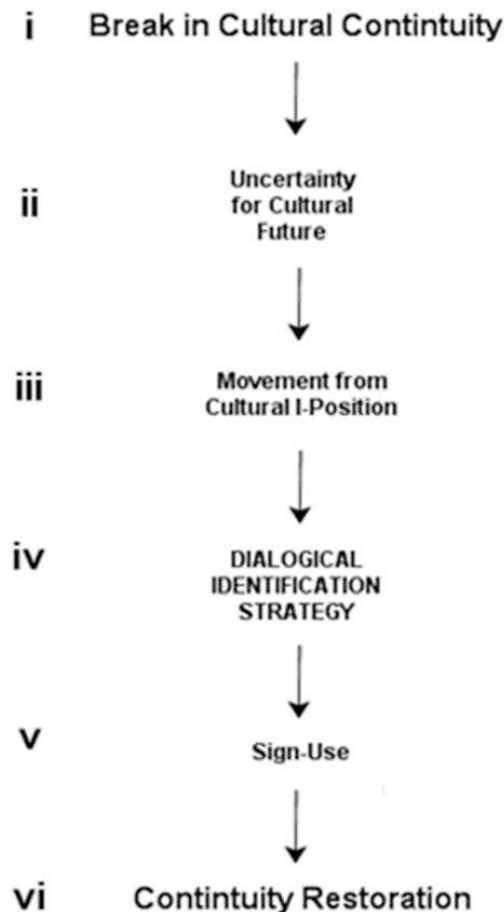
*(1) Our own Irish culture: I think a lot of that has gone anyway. (2) People have got, I don't know, the Celtic Tiger, whatever you want to call it. (3) I think people have lost the true meaning of what our culture was year ago. (4) Everyone is out now for themselves... (5) I'd say within twenty years we'll see a different Ireland to what we've seen in the last twenty years. It'll have changed, it'll have changed...(6) but are the Irish people going to pack up and move out of this country because we feel it's not our country anymore? That's what I felt yesterday... (7) When I went into the supermarket I actually felt like a tourist. The people in front of me, three kids and four adults, so seven of them, and the girl behind the till conversing with them away and you're there in your own country and you, well, I do anyway, and you think it feels like there are more of them than us...(8) I think asking some people what it means to be Irish is important because I think we've lost what is Irish and that's what it is to me: lost...(9) How can we not have a clue what Irish is?(10) But I'll tell you, I want to go back to my roots.*

Sarah begins by presenting Irish culture in Modern Ireland as LOST (section 1). Separating herself from the general population, she presents Modern Ireland as GREEDY (section 2) because of the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger economy. Sarah reiterates that Ireland's authentic culture, what existed in Old Ireland, has been LOST (section 3) due to the new modern SELFISHNESS (section 4). The rapid cultural CHANGE seen by Sarah in Modern Ireland (section 5) leads to the presentation of the Irish as DISENFRANCHISED (section 6) in their own country. Sarah describes an incidence leading her to present the Irish as OUTNUMBERED in Ireland (section 7) which supports her repeated assertion that the Irish culture in Modern Ireland is LOST (section 8). The rapid change has led her to be UNCERTAIN about modern Irish culture (section 9) and she will maintain it by rejecting Modern Ireland and returning to being ROOTED in Old Ireland (section 10).

### **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this article was to investigate the relationship between societal-level processes and individuals' identities in a cultural contact zone. This relationship was apparent in that cultural change caused a break in individual-level cultural continuity.

The resultant uncertainty caused a movement from the unstable cultural I-position to a future-viable position (Abbey, 2006; Onishi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003; O'Sullivan-Lago et al., under review). A visual representation of the process involved, as illustrated in the interview extracts, is presented in Figure 1:



*Figure 1:* The dialogical identification strategy process of cultural continuity restoration

The results suggest that the development of the cultural contact zone and the resultant societal-level change had a profound impact upon the participants' identities. The individual-level break in their cultural continuity (i) resulted in their cultural identity position becoming unstable because it was no longer meaningfully connected to its past (ii). As expected, the dialogical self engaged in a process of utilising a dialogical identification strategy that would restore this broken continuity. Dermot and Sarah did this by re-positioning their identities to the "I as an Old Irish Person" identity. The strategy employed a particular form of sign-use (v) as a means to its own ends: representing Old Ireland positively and Modern Ireland negatively. Through these signs, the Old Irish position offered a specific form of cultural continuity restoration (vi), namely the rejection of Modern Ireland and return to Old Ireland, to restore the continuity with the cultural past.

Dermot and Sarah both found cultural change, such as the economic prosperity and recent immigration, to be a radical break from their culture's past. This break in cultural continuity left the participants' cultural identities unstable because the vision they had of their cultural future seemed completely removed from their cultural past. "Old



Ireland”, as represented by both participants, was authentic and is in every way preferable to “Modern Ireland”, represented as over-ambitious, competitive, disenfranchised and cultureless. These changes are unacceptable and unwanted and neither Dermot nor Sarah could incorporate the economic, societal and cultural changes into their Irish cultural identity. The break in cultural continuity and consequent instability of their cultural identity position forced the “I” to move away to a more future viable position. Dermot and Sarah utilised a very specific identification strategy, emphasising their “Old Irish” cultural position because it is, in their view, more future-viable and desirable than the Irish cultural position in its current, unstable and changing form.

The signs used by this identification strategy in the Dialogical Self were deliberate to restore continuity with Old Ireland. The signs used for Modern Ireland were wholly negative, representing it as false and unstable, and the cultural changes were abnormalised, for example, “divided” and “greedy”. Despite the admitted advantages Modern Ireland offers to its people such as employment and wealth, all the elements of change, including the economic prosperity and immigration, were rejected. From the perspective of this position, if the societal changes were to be rejected by the Irish people and the changes then disappeared, Old Ireland could, in theory, return. This restoration of the past is what the participants proposed by using the Old Irish Person strategy: Dermot “withdrew” to living in the Eighties and Sarah planned on going “back” to her roots.

The results presented are concurrent with cultural continuity theory which proposes that disruption to one’s culture makes development more difficult (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). We suggest that the high levels of uncertainty displayed by Dermot and Sarah for their cultural future, evident in their representation of Modern Ireland as dislocated from its past, strongly suggest that they experienced an individual-level break in cultural continuity. It is apparent in the data that societal-level change had a profound impact upon the dialogical self and the societal-level processes that Abbey and Falmagne (2008) propose are lacking from the formulation of the Dialogical Self can be seen to have a great influence upon individuals, particularly in times of societal change.

This article has used insights from cultural continuity theory to explore the relationship between identity and societal change. When cultural continuity was under threat, the dialogical self responded to solve the psychological problem of uncertainty by utilising an identification strategy. It is imperative that the theoretical considerations of the Dialogical Self are expanded to acknowledge the relationship between societal and identity processes. The ever increasing number of contact zones worldwide offers new and exciting opportunities for identity research to investigate change associated with globalisation. Studying majority groups is particularly important because they are under-researched and, as the current research shows, are subject to a great deal of uncertainty as a result of cultural change. Longitudinal studies have the potential to be very useful in investigating the change in the relationship between societal-level process and identity over time and the analysis could be extended to different age groups, such as children and adolescents who are living in these new globalised societies. Comparisons between contact zones with structures in place to maintain continuity with those lacking in these structures would offer a great insight and could be of great use to policy making.

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