



Voice Dialogue
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Voice Dialogue and Internal Family Systems: kindred spirits

by

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Introduction

For several years now, the Internal Family Systems method has been on the rise, a vision and approach that shares much common ground with Voice Dialogue. Our Voice Dialogue students frequently ask us about the similarities and differences.

With this article we have the intention to inform experienced Voice Dialogue facilitators about the differences and similarities between Voice Dialogue, the Psychology of Selves and the Aware Ego process (VD) on the one hand and Internal Family System (IFS) on the other hand.

Our primary objective is to provide you with information that will enable you to answer questions about VD and IFS, and to highlight the complementarity of the two methods. Since we assume that you are familiar with Voice Dialogue, we do not intend to be exhaustive, but rather to explain it briefly. Because we assume that you already are familiar with VD we do not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to explain the core points concisely.

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1. Voice Dialogue

Origins of Voice Dialogue

As we all know, Voice Dialogue was developed in the early 1970s by Hal and Sidra Stone, both psychologists and psychotherapists. They based their Psychology of Selves partly on the work of Carl Gustav Jung (Hal Stone's background) and partly on knowledge from behavioral therapy (Sidra Stone's background). They were also influenced by humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, who emphasized self-realization and the development of one's full potential. Transpersonal and spiritual movements also played a role in shaping their thinking about the psyche.

Applicability

Voice Dialogue is used in numerous countries around the world in therapy, relationship therapy, coaching, and training. It is a versatile method that can be used to address a wide range of issues, such as dealing with dilemmas, making choices, developing a broader behavioral repertoire, dealing with inner reactions to major life changes, healing past pain, breaking patterns in relationships, and so on.

The Voice Dialogue perspective on personality development

In VD, we assume that we do not consist of a single self, but of countless selves - also called sub-personalities. These personalities came to protect our core vulnerability. We distinguish the following elements:

Different Selves:

Inner Child: This is the original vulnerable self in each of us, one born carrying a natural connection to transpersonal (or spiritual) experiences. It is physically vulnerable and in need of protection but not weak. Its perceptions are not limited by the rational mind or by available language. Instead, this self is an energy sensitive that perceives and reacts to the world energetically and directly attuned to the energetics of the surrounding field, the individual selves, and the quality of the energetic connection between people (linkage). It differs from other child selves (such as the magical, playful, shy, wounded selves). In later years we might talk about this self as carrying someone's unique "core vulnerability". The presence of the Inner Child is enables us to make intimate connections with others.

Primary selves: As our vulnerable parts are often rejected or hurt, primary selves tend to take over to prevent further wounding. These are the parts that are most present in our lives.

Disowned selves: These are aspects or capacities in us that we learned early on were not appreciated by our environment, were rejected, or otherwise put us at risk - e.g., our instinctual energy. We disown them: when they try to come forward, we push them away. They get little space and are usually overruled by primary selves.

Undeveloped selves: These are aspects within us that have not been called upon much and have not been developed.

Elements of the process

Awareness: This is our capacity to reflect on ourselves - our actions, thoughts, and feelings - without judgment or the need to change anything.

Aware Ego Process (AEP): This is our capacity to create space within ourselves to simultaneously experience and allow different reactions (selves), and to bear the tension that may exist between these parts.

Awareness and the Aware Ego Process are neither selves nor categories of selves.

The goal of Voice Dialogue

Hal and Sidra Stone designed their method as a path to consciousness. Voice Dialogue focuses on developing and expanding awareness of the dynamics in our inner world. They called this the Aware Ego Process. Voice Dialogue does not aim to change selves but to get to know and welcome all the selves in your inner world. Transformation comes from making room for all that lives inside you, thus gaining more possibilities and options for action. VD is not about getting rid of anything. On the contrary, everything within us is welcome. You gain access to all the energies you possess as a human being.

The goal of Voice Dialogue is therefore not primarily the healing of pain or wounds. Healing can, however, be a result of getting to know your selves. Voice Dialogue leads to more self-compassion, self-acceptance, and kindness toward all parts. By discovering why a certain part - one you may wish to get rid of - has become so strong, understanding arises, and the possibility of forming a relationship with that part, and with the often underlying wounded part, emerges. The goal of VD is for you to see and experience that all your selves are parts of you and that you can relate to those parts. By separating from them, you can build a relationship with them. You then step into the position of caring for them, giving them attention, and choosing when and how much to listen to them. This increases your ability to lead your life rather than be led by your selves. This an ongoing lifelong process.

Besides increasing inner awareness, VD is also helpful in examining and breaking through bonding patterns in relationships.

How the method works

In the Voice Dialogue method, you learn on three levels:

- A. To meet and get to know your sub-personalities.
- B. To look from the position of Awareness.
- C. To learn to dwell in the middle between your parts and to take more conscious leadership. This process is called the Aware Ego Process (AEP).

A. Meeting subpersonalities

One of the defining characteristics of Voice Dialogue is that the facilitator literally engages in dialogue with the various parts involved in the client's issue. All parts are equally welcome and are not pathologized. The facilitator speaks to each of them, time and again, with full interest, without judgment, and with the intent to get to know them. No one has to leave.

We generally begin by inviting a primary part to manifest. This is the most familiar one, protects the client in some way, and won't just step aside. Each part the facilitator invites chooses its own place in the room and is addressed as a unique, autonomous part of the client. No other method in parts work gives sub-personalities such extensive voice through direct dialogue with the facilitator as Voice Dialogue does. The facilitator engages both verbally and energetically with the sub-personalities, tuning in energetically as best as possible. This helps the part feel seen and invited. The goal is to physically and energetically experience and honor the part.

The separate physical position for a part is crucial in this approach. It brings clarity and structure (compared to inner chaos). The place a sub-personality chooses offers important information. For example, a part that stands behind a curtain communicates something about its position in the client's life.

By truly stepping *into* a part and becoming it, even temporarily, you actually experience that part. You experience the part:

- * Energetic: Which energy does this part carry and how does this energy feel?
- * Physically: How does it feel to be in that part? Where do you feel it in your body?
- * How does this part behave?
- * When does it appear, and what vulnerability does it try to protect?
- * What is its intention?

By identifying with the part, you begin to feel it. Through extensive and energetically attuned dialogue, the part may come to realize its own history, qualities, concerns, and goals. It can, so to speak, come home to itself. The separation begins through honoring.

Hal Stone: "Build a temple for each sub-personality and enter it with curiosity and reverence."

Hal Stone: "It is a very different experience to talk to a self in a visualization or in your journal, than it is to become a self where the energy is held by someone else." The fullness of each self is revealed through embodiment. Internal connection to selves is a different experience. One cannot hear the nuances of voice tones or perceive the body language and gestures of each self in this way when the dialogue is purely internal.

This dialogue is non-judgmental and not intended to change the part. This is a fundamental stance in Voice Dialogue. Myriam Dyak: "A deep relaxation occurs when a part understands that it is appreciated as it is, and that it is not expected to integrate, discharge, evolve, or do anything other than simply *be* itself. Integration, discharge, change, and evolution do happen naturally, but instead of expecting inner change, Voice Dialogue changes the context in which the inner world operates. In a sense, Voice Dialogue facilitation invites the inner world into a new home where each part has its own room, space to breathe, live, and be, free of attacks and interference. The more a self is allowed to live in that place, the more it naturally relaxes and, to some extent,

evolves, but at its own pace.” The separation is triggered by honor. Hal Stone: “Build a temple for each subpersonality and enter it with curiosity and reverence.”

Each primary part was created to protect us from a particular vulnerability. Through a primary part, we can also come into contact with that underlying vulnerability and encounter the wounded and original child we once were. In that encounter, the inner Child can reveal itself, share feelings and experiences, and gain a missed and healing experience. This can create a more loving relationship between the client and the Inner Child. Pain incurred from traumatic experiences can thus be experienced, enveloped, and cared for from within the AEP. This has a healing effect.

For every part that sits in front, there is another that has gone underground. Voice Dialogue is the only method that consistently seeks the counterpart or polarity of the primary protectors. Disowned parts are also invited into the space with the same attention and reverence, questioned, and honored. By getting to know the opposite, the client becomes aware of that part’s potential and learns how it also offers protection. For example, if setting boundaries is a disowned part, the client may discover that this part protects against overcommitting, doing things one doesn’t want to do, etc. Since primary parts are not pushed away but both polarities are honored, the AEP allows clients to experience how each side can uniquely contribute to their lives.

B. Awareness

This position is also unique to Voice Dialogue. After the dialogue with the sub-personalities, the client sits next to the facilitator and can look at the session from a reflective stance, without the intention to change anything, absorbing the content in service of the Aware Ego Process. By involving Awareness in a session, you enhance the ability to remember that you *have* certain parts but *are not* those parts. Observing them from a distance helps store that memory. You’ve *been* there, which makes it easier to find your way back. The AEP is not a permanent state of being. Awareness helps you return to it more quickly.

C. Aware Ego Process (AEP)

In a Voice Dialogue session, after encountering a sub-personality, the client is invited to return to the center seat. In this position, the client separates from that part and can still feel it without fully identifying with it. They become aware that this is a *part* of themselves with its own desires and concerns. The Aware Ego is the place within where we can repeatedly return to experience various parts without being overtaken by them. From the Aware Ego we are able to clearly and objectively hear what our Selves are saying and feeling without value or judgment.

The AEP is not a subpersonality or a permanent state, but a lifelong process of separating from parts, sitting between polarities, engaging with vulnerable parts, and moving into more conscious choices, not acting from part-based convictions or polarization. It’s more of a *verb* than a *noun*. A conscious choice can only emerge from contact with opposing parts. A conscious choice can only arise from contact with opposing parts. It is a unique organic and dynamic process.

In Voice Dialogue, no specific qualities that we would naturally possess are attributed to the AEP, the space between the parts. The AEP is an ability that is present within us that we can develop when we become increasingly able to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and embrace the different parts of ourselves. Voice Dialogue does not believe that there is one authentic self-separate from all the egos. There is no striving to be in the AEP all the time. In fact, that is not humanly possible. We look at the whole of the parts within us and see that everything is part of us. Therefore, there is no striving for authenticity, for being real, for enlightenment. Rather, there is a striving for growth and strengthening of the ability to make balanced use of all the possibilities we have within us. Myriam Dyak: “The AEP in Voice Dialogue gives a concrete, physical, and energetic place from which to choreograph the dance of one’s inner selves.”

The terminology used in Voice Dialogue is non-judgmental and gives room for how the client experiences or would describe a certain part.

Working with dreams

Working with dreams and daydreams is also an important gateway to awareness in VD. The I-figure in a dream is often seen as one of our primary selves. Other figures or events refer to something we've overlooked during the day. In Voice Dialogue sessions, we can also give voice to these figures and discover their energy and message. The facilitator supports that the client can feel the energy and understand the messages that the dream carries. In that sense dreams can become an inner teacher. The I-figure in the daydream is usually a disowned self.

Voice Dialogue and relationships

Voice Dialogue also has its own view on relationships and how sub-personalities relate to each other within them. We call these Bonding Patterns. We assume that selves respond to each other in relationships. In a bonding pattern (positive or negative), we are reduced to just a few selves that react in a specific pattern. The reason lies in unacknowledged or unexpressed underlying vulnerability.

Working with Voice Dialogue affects relationships. As other parts start to participate, we generate different responses. Looking at relationships through the VD lens helps us better understand others' parts and recognize and shift our own bonding patterns. This self-awareness enables dialogue from an Aware Ego, evolving from attachment to connection.

The role of the facilitator

The facilitator in Voice Dialogue is not a therapist or an all-knowing coach, but someone who facilitates the encounter between the client and the sub-personalities without judgment or agenda. The facilitator is also accessible themselves. The client discovers their parts in relation to the facilitator. This principle deeply influences the facilitator's attitude. They aim for nothing, have no change-agenda, and are multiply loyal, equally allied with all parts. By welcoming everything with equal respect, the facilitator encourages the client to do the same and to care for their parts like a good inner parent. Specifically for the wounded child parts, the facilitator is a co-regulator that helps the client learn to regulate themselves. The facilitator is holding the AEP of the client until the client strengthens it enough to hold its own AEP.

More and more VD becomes a way of viewing your life, a practice to return to the Aware Ego whenever facing a dilemma, tension, vulnerability, or when a part is going into overdrive.

2. Internal Family Systems

Origins of IFS

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a psychotherapeutic model developed by family systems therapist Richard Schwartz in the 1980s. He was influenced by the work of Voice Dialogue, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, Salvador Minuchin, Paul Watzlawick and Virginia Satir. As a family therapist, he empirically discovered that individual members of a family also carry an internal family of parts within themselves. He initially applied family therapy interventions in conversations with individuals and their inner parts.

Applicability

IFS is on its way to becoming a scientifically supported and internationally recognized psychotherapy method, especially since Bessel van der Kolk dedicated a chapter to it in his bestseller *The Body Keeps the Score*. It is used to treat trauma, depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders and offers a holistic approach to inner conflict and healing.

The IFS view of personality development

Like Voice Dialogue, IFS sees the human being as made up of multiple inner parts. It uses different terminology. **Managers:** Parts that try to proactively manage behavior with the intention of protecting us and preventing us from getting hurt. These parts help a person maintain control over situations and avoid risky ventures. Some primary selves we know from Voice Dialogue fall into this category, such as hard workers, caretakers, and controllers.

Exiles: Parts that carry unprocessed pain, trauma, or wounds from the past. These are vulnerable, emotional, and often young or frozen in time. They want to be heard and healed, but managers and firefighters suppress them to avoid emotional overwhelm. In Voice Dialogue, these would be considered disowned selves.

Firefighters: They spring into action when painful feelings or memories begin to surface (i.e., when the managers are no longer able to keep the exiles suppressed). They react impulsively and aim to numb or distract from pain. Parts associated with fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses fall into this group. Managers and Firefighters together are called protectors.

Just as in Voice Dialogue, all parts are welcome, and none are judged or dismissed. IFS assumes that each part adopted its role in the client's life for a good reason.

Self: This is a core concept in IFS. It refers to an inner presence characterized by eight qualities: curiosity, confidence, calm, compassion, clarity, courage, creativity, and connectedness. IFS holds that every person is born with this Self and always possesses it.

Goals of IFS

The goal of IFS is for the Self to lead the internal family of parts. IFS assumes that every part has a positive intention, even if its actions seem destructive. The aim is for the client to get to know their parts, allowing the pain of exiles to be healed. Once healing takes place, the managers and firefighters can relinquish their protective roles, as the Self takes over. The Self becomes the internal decision-maker. IFS fosters self-compassion and self-acceptance, which also increases empathy toward others. For this reason, IFS is used in couples therapy as well.

How the method works

At the start of a session, the IFS therapist assesses whether the client is able to relate to their inner world from the Self. Usually, there is no immediate access to the Self, so the therapist invites the client to at least be curious about the parts that are present.

Once there is enough openness, the therapist invites the client to connect with a part currently in the foreground, often a manager or firefighter, depending on the client's level of tension.

The therapist then follows a protocol called the six F's:

1. Find: Identify a specific part, often by focusing on a physical sensation in the body.
2. Focus: Concentrate on that part and become consciously aware of it.
3. Flesh it out: Explore and understand the part's functions and needs.
4. Feel toward: Let the part feel that you understand who it is and why it is here.
5. BeFriend: Accept the part and build a respectful, positive relationship.
6. Fears: Explore what the part is afraid would happen if it could no longer do its current job.

After these so called six F's, the client typically reaches the underlying fear, often held by an exile that becomes accessible. A second protocol follows with these steps:

1. Build trust and relationship between Self and the exile: The client places themselves, as an adult and from the Self, into the memory of the past.
2. Witnessing: The exile is asked whether the client fully understands and feels what the exile went through.
3. Retrieval: The wounded child is invited to leave the painful memory, possibly after the client performs a corrective action (Redo).
4. Unburdening: The exile is invited to release old burdens, often by symbolically giving them to water, earth, fire, or air. The original childlike energy is then liberated.
5. Revisiting protectors: They are asked to see that the Self is now able to care for the exile.

This protocol shows that IFS is a method focused on healing trauma.

The role of the therapist

In IFS, the main healing agent is the relationship between the client's Self and their parts. The therapist's primary role is to help the client access the Self.

The intention is for the client to conduct the inner exploration themselves. The client remains seated in the same place and is invited to enter into a dual consciousness, namely Self, which explores and questions, and the parts that provide the answers. This is called 'Indirect Access.' The counselor does not therefore enter into direct contact with the parts. If this process is still too difficult for the client, the therapist will switch to 'direct access' and enter into conversation with a part themselves. The client remains seated in the same place. The reason for using indirect access is that IFS emphasizes the fact that the client must immediately learn to engage in dialogue and relationship with the parts themselves. In this way, IFS hopes to avoid a dependent relationship between the client and the therapist as much as possible. In addition, the client is encouraged to experience what it is like to relate to the inner parts from the Self.

IFS therapists must themselves remain in Self-energy to avoid activating their own managers and causing transference.

3. Similarities between Voice Dialogue and IFS

Core assumptions shared by IFS and Voice Dialogue:

1. The psyche is naturally multidimensional. We consist of parts.
2. All parts are welcome, no part needs to be eliminated.
3. Awareness of internal processes is essential.
4. The Aware Ego Process (AEP) in Voice Dialogue and the Self in IFS share several overlapping qualities.
5. Unblending or separation from parts is a core part of the work.
6. Both approaches aim to increase the client's self-leadership by providing tools that can be used independently.
7. Both share a similar view that helps to identify and shift relational patterns.

Therapist stance in both VD and IFS:

1. A curious and non-judgmental attitude
2. An empathetic and compassionate presence
3. Self-awareness and self-reflection
4. Patience and respect for the client's pace
5. Neutrality and trust in the client's self-healing capacity

4. Differences between IFS and Voice Dialogue

IFS	Voice Dialogue
Focuses on treating trauma, depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions, offering a holistic approach to inner conflicts and healing.	Voice Dialogue can be used for a wide range of issues (dilemmas, life changes, choices, developing new behaviors) and can be used in coaching, therapy, and relationship therapy. Although the method is not specifically intended for trauma treatment, wounded and traumatized parts can also be safely addressed in the work.
Distinguishes Exiles, Firefighters, Managers, and Self	Distinguishes basically Primary Selves, Disowned Selves, Undeveloped Selves, Vulnerable Selves/Inner Children. Awareness and the Aware Ego Process (AEP) are neither selves nor categories of selves.
Main goal: healing of trauma	Main goal: to increase awareness and the ability to welcome all parts of ourselves and allow them to participate in our lives. (The process of the conscious self). This leads to greater self-compassion, balance, and freedom of choice. People experience the method as beneficial and healing. The Aware Ego is not innate; it grows through separation from sub-personalities. That's why we call it a process (AEP). It is not a goal to reach, but it is an ever-evolving dynamic movement rather than a fixed state. The AEP is a lifelong process of constantly shifting between different inner parts. By being aware of this (from a place of Awareness) and strengthening your ability to move between the parts, the AEP grows.

Self is innate, everyone is born with it, and it is always present Self is the source of leadership and healing and is characterized by 8 C's: calmness, clarity, curiosity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness The client is invited to engage in inner dialogue with their parts from the Self, without physically changing position. Sometimes the therapist uses "direct access" but still without movement Parts are transformed through unburdening and acquire new qualities. The IFS Institute sets criteria for becoming a certified IFS therapist and licenses trainers to teach IFS using a strict curriculum	The 8 C's are not central to the Aware Ego but are seen as qualities of several different selves. The AEP embraces these as one polarity and their opposites as another The facilitator speaks <i>directly and literally</i> with the parts. Each part chooses its own physical place in the room. This allows the part to manifest fully, be seen, experienced, and honored. A compassionate relationship can then emerge from the center Parts remain who they are; change occurs through relationship with the AEP and by reclaiming the energy of disowned parts. Primary parts retain their essence but lose their trauma-related charge. Voice Dialogue is open source. The development of the Aware Ego Process cannot be certified. Hal and Sidra Stone deliberately chose not to issue diplomas. However, facilitators are encouraged to train seriously and continue developing their own AEP.
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5. In conclusion

Given the above, it is logical that we often receive questions about the similarities and differences between VD and IFS. The two visions and methods differ greatly in a number of respects. However, this does not detract from the fact that they can complement each other perfectly. People who are familiar with VD can add the interventions of the IFS protocol that focus on the exiles. This is particularly valuable when it is necessary to further deepen the relationship between the Aware Ego and the wounded child part. IFS then adds extra healing elements to the familiar Voice Dialogue work.

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