Dialogical selves in action: Movements within and between frames in work meetings

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Abstract
In our article, we present an analysis of work meeting interactions based on Hubert Hermans’ dialogical self theory and Erving Goffman’s frame analysis. Goffman’s approach has similarities with positioning theory and discursive psychology, which have a theoretical link to the dialogical self theory. In our analysis of work meetings, we identified three different frames in which participants discussed the acquisition of a new online text messaging service for the firm for which they worked. These frames were financial, pragmatic–instrumental, and social, all of which constructed different perspectives of the technological object and its use in daily work. Finally, the theoretical and methodological differences of dialogical self theory and frame analysis are outlined. The contribution of this article is two-fold; it illustrates how dialogical self theory and frame analysis provides, first, complementary approaches to social interaction and, second, how they differ in their orientation to the study of social situations.

Keywords
dialogical self theory, frame analysis, interaction, positioning, work meetings

The expansion of dialogical self theory (DST) from the individual level of research to social- or group-level processes has been an important recent development (Hermans, 2016). Hermans (2001, 2014, 2018) has underlined in his theoretical and methodological studies that a key concept in DST is the analysis of I-positions, according to which the human mind can be interpreted as a “society of mind” that constitutes different voices
and is based on the fact that we are able to take different I-positions in our everyday actions. This means that the dialogical self should be seen according to DST as a moving, changing, and dynamic polyphonic subject comprising different “voiced positions.” These positions change in dialogical encounters and create a landscape of I-positions, or a mini-society, for a person who interacts with the surrounding social world. In group, team, or organisation levels of study, this means that it is possible to analyse leadership or team development as a leader’s dynamic, dialogical relation to her or his subordinates (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

Here, we consider the conceptual and methodological ideas of DST. We empirically analyse work meeting interactions between employees and managers of a small business. We argue that in order to understand the dialogical self and the forms of dialogical encounters, it is essential to pay attention to the flux and fluidity of interactions, in which the different stances between people are constructed discursively in ongoing discussions. Instead of considering the dialogical self as a psychologically formed society of mind, we concentrate on how the dialogical self emerges in light of qualitative interaction data in work meetings in which participants discuss, argue, and suggest solutions for practical problems they face in their daily work. Our analysis is based on both analysis of voiced I-positions outlined by Hermans and the frame analysis (FA) developed by Erving Goffman (1986). As Moore et al. (2011) outline, FA offers a complementary perspective of the dialogicality of self because the conflicts or tensions between frames are the origin of dialogical relations. In this respect, our study is focused on avoiding reducing the individual to the social or the reality around the subject merely to subjective construction based on dialogues with imaginary persons (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011).

This article begins with a theoretical discussion of DST followed by a review of Goffman’s FA and a study of work meetings. Thereafter, the empirical study and data are presented. The analysis aims to illustrate how DST and FA could be seen as complementary approaches that offer conceptual tools to analyse interaction in multiparty situations. The article concludes by suggesting that both DST and FA may offer researchers of dialogical selves a fruitful method for further studies in group or team contexts.

**Theoretical background**

**Dialogical self and positioning**

As Bertau et al. (2012) have noted, there are two traditions that are essential to the formation of DST according to Hermans and his colleagues. These are self psychology, developed by William James and G. H. Mead, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s polyphonic view of the novel and language. Both traditions are important, but Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony offers a new metaphor for the study of self as a “dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the landscape of the mind” (Hermans, 2014, p. 152). Most research based on DST is focused on individual-level analysis of the human mind and human actions. However, those researchers who have an academic background in social psychology tend to underline the meaning of social context and the importance of intersubjective relationships for the proper understanding of the dialogical self (see Moore et al., 2011). Researchers who are interested in psychotherapeutic practices, developmental
studies, or personality psychology tend to see the dialogical self as autonomous and flexible, capable of taking different internal positions in space and time. Discussions about subject–alter interactions highlight that it is also essential to conceptually clarify the role of institutional structures in the analysis of the dialogical self (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011; Linell, 2009).

In his many studies, Hermans (2001, 2014, 2018) has dealt with the fundamental themes of DST. According to Hermans (2001), “The dialogical self is ‘social,’ not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in a multivoiced self” (p. 250). Although DST is focused on the intrapsychological dynamics of mind, Hermans (2001) underlines that interpsychological and intrapsychological processes should be considered equally important for dialogicality. However, there is no research on these interpsychological processes, for most of the methods developed in the study of the dialogical self are focused on intrapsychological processes (Jasper et al., 2011). As Hermans (2001) shows in his theoretical considerations, it is possible to describe intersubjective worlds in dyadic relationships from the perspective of sharing and communication, in which people are sharing something (two-way internal sharing, one-way internal sharing, and external sharing) or keeping it as their own knowledge (nonsharing internal area and nonsharing external area). This analysis leaves open the meaning of interpsychological processes, internalisation of culture, and social positions for interaction because DST underlines the imaginative formations of other people in the mini-society of the mind.

The theoretical and conceptual merit of DST is in the fact that it illuminates the meaning of dialogical construction of self and identity based on internal and external dimensions, which interlace in action. In this sense, the formation of self is sign mediated, and the focus of analysis in the psychological or personal formation of dialogical relationships to self and other. The challenge for the analysis of interaction is that DST regards positioning as movements between spatialised or external positions reinforcing “the externalist conception of dialogicality by replicating it ‘within’ the mind” (Baerveldt, 2014, p. 71). According to Hermans (2006), “Dialogical self theory assumes that there is no essential difference between the self as a society of mind and the ‘real’ external society” (p. 150). This leaves open the meaning of others not only as personally constructed but also as real human beings in social situations and immanent interaction. Social situations are more than a subject’s internally or externally formed repertory of I-positions, and the understanding of social situations is not the same for the different actors. In this regard, DST may lead to the reduction of the meaning of social context and so simplify the interiorisation process (Bertau & Karsten, 2018). Other persons are present in a subject’s intrapsychological world as voices or inner-Others, which means that an actor uses direct and indirect quotes, refers to another person’s opinions, beliefs, utterances, or ideas, or echoes second-hand or borrowed ideas (Aveling et al., 2014). In work meetings, they are also present as real persons with opinions, comments, and opposing views.

An interesting attempt to integrate the individual and social dynamics of interaction is positioning theory, developed by Harré and Van Langenhove (1999). The goal of positioning theory is to provide a more dynamic alternative to studying interactions than the more static concept of roles (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). As Raggatt (2007) has noted, there is a need for conceptual clarity of the various forms of positioning. In his
studies, Raggatt (2007, 2015) has both presented a system of classification of the forms of positioning and analysed a fictionalised scenario in order to illuminate how the social dynamics of positioning and intrapersonal microdialogues direct interactions in dyadic encounters. As Raggatt (2015) states, the model is preliminary and “focuses on positioning processes in interaction episodes from the perspective of one individual, as that individual is embedded both in the symbolic order and in the situation-at-hand” (p. 788). Considering all the dimensions of positioning processes, the model summarises a wide group of semiotic and social elements, which are useful in analysing social interaction; however, it can be difficult to take into account all the details of the social, semiotic, and sociopsychological processes mentioned in the study.

**Frames and work meetings**

Raggatt’s (2015) model of positioning processes in the dialogical self integrates discursive psychology with DST. Another way to conceptualise the connection between symbolic order and individuals’ interpretations of situations is to use Goffman’s (1986) FA, which has the same aim: to analyse and understand the dynamics of social situations and what is actually happening. Both approaches have many similarities, but, considering interaction research, Goffman’s FA provides a less complicated method for analysis. According to Goffman, frames guide our actions in social situations. We interpret events by framing them, and these framings set expectations, goals, and normative rules for interactions. Normally, our actions are directed by specific frames, but in social situations, frames may overlap, cause conflict, set different expectations, expand, or change.

FA is a general name for an approach using the concept of frames as a tool to understand social situations as multilayered events based on the organisation of experiences that people have of social situations, practices, or objects. In order to understand the social world around them and to be part of situations, people must have an idea of what is going on. The aim of analysis “is to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyse the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject” (Goffman, 1986, p. 10). According to Goffman, a frame is not only a mental concept but also a structure of human experience that individuals have at any moment of their social lives. In his analysis, Goffman (1986) presents a distinction in primary frames, which can vary in their degree of organisation. Some primary frames are more articulated, with a system of rules and entities, and some are more or less unclear in their nature. The role of primary frames is to make sense of infinite numbers of concrete events defined by certain terms.

Goffman (1986) also makes a distinction between two broad classes of frames: natural and social. In natural frames, things are determined by natural forces, such as weather and climate. In social frames, processes are more open and determined by human agency, by “guided doings,” as Goffman calls them. Social reality is not static, and frames change all the time according to ongoing interactions. In other words, “frames can be thus broken, frozen, shifted, changed, challenged, bent, stretched, substituted, maintained, confronted, defrosted, transferred, destroyed, contracted, expanded” (Hviid Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2015, p. 125). Professional practices often contain more than one possible frame. For instance, in the case of domestic violence, healthcare professionals are
supposed to provide help and support for families, but they may frame the problem in different ways (Virkki et al., 2015). The stability of the self and the dialogical tensions of action emerges from the frames people use in workplace interaction, but the stability of institutions and the stability of the self are two different things (Moore et al., 2011). People may adapt to institutional frames, but these frames can also cause subjective dilemmas for the self if people consider them to be too restrictive.

Compared with DST, FA stresses more the fact that meaning is not freely created by the actors involved in interaction, for the interpretation and emergence of meaning is bound to frames, by which meaning is created and interpreted (Heiskala, 1999). However, frames do not fully dominate interaction, and actors are able to change them, but they set limits to the way people understand each other and act in social situations. In order to be in dialogical relationships, actors must have the same frame or understand the frame within which the other person speaks. The different interpretations of the same sign create differences in situational understanding between the subjects. FA represents a situational approach to social encounters, which reveals the differences in interpreting the meaning of a sign. It does not focus on the landscape of I-positions or small details of interaction as DST. In this respect, it does not consider the personal or intrapersonal dimension in dialogical encounters, which is also one dimension in interaction. The goal of FA is to show how actors’ understanding of a situation is different based on their social position or role in conversation.

There are two important observations to make about the formation of the dialogical self in work meetings. First, work meetings are a general frame for interactions, enabling interactions between participants. Conversation analytical studies on work meetings have illuminated the small details of meeting interactions, such as managing disagreement and accounting for the right to assign tasks (Angouri, 2012; Svennevig & Djordjevic, 2015). In this respect, a socially given frame does exist prior to the individuals whose actions will this frame into life (Gonos, 1977). Second, there are a multitude of frames within and between frames as opposed to one dominating frame that sets limits and content for discussion. Multiprofessional practices commonly contain two to seven different frames of the same object or phenomenon, such as postnatal depression, dying in hospitals, early childhood practices, and domestic violence (Everingham et al., 2006; Peräkylä, 1989; Puriola, 2002; Virkki et al., 2015). In a professional context, the number of frames is related to the backgrounds of the participants and their roles in a particular social practice. By dialogicality, we refer here to the general ability to take up the position of the other in interaction and in this way distanitate from the personal self based on mastery of language and other symbolic sign systems (Gillespie, 2012; Raggatt, 2015).

**Data and methods**

The qualitative data used in our study originates from monthly work meetings held in a small real estate and rental apartment brokerage firm, which is part of a larger franchising business chain in Finland. Altogether, seven meetings were recorded in 2012 and 2013 with one video camera placed in the office room (the firm did not have a special room equipped for meetings). The number of personnel attending the meetings varied from five to seven: the CEO, financial manager, customer service employees, and two
The data used in this study are part of a larger data corpus, collected by one of the authors, comprising the seven meetings, two 2-day workshops, individual interviews, and observations. In this study, the data are from two different work meetings organised in the spring of 2013 (meetings 2 and 4); in these meetings, the participants discussed a new online text messaging service that would replace the one already being used by the company. This was one of the topics listed in the preinformed meeting agenda created by the CEO and was of much importance for the business, as the development of new technologies was also mentioned in the interviews and workshops as a significant theme for the future development of the firm. The transcriptions were checked, retranscribed, and translated from Finnish into English according to conversation analytic conventions (see Appendix 1 in the Supplemental Material online), which was the analytical framework used in analysis. Using detailed transcriptions as data extracts, we aimed at highlighting the sequential nature of the interaction data including notations of overlapping speech, pauses, and pacing. The whole research team consisting of four persons watched the original video recordings, read the transcripts created by the second author, and jointly discussed the interpretations. The detailed analysis of different voices and I-positions of each frame was conducted by the first two authors.

Goffman did not provide any clear methodological model for FA. As a form of qualitative research, FA can be based on individual or focus-group interviews, textual or written material, participant observations, or video-recorded interaction data (Prego-Vázquez, 2007; Puriola, 2002; Sandvik et al., 2017; Virkki et al., 2015). In this study, frames were inductively identified from the interaction data by following the rules of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first stage, we analysed the topics and content of work meetings through an overall thematic analysis by watching the video recordings and reading the literary transcriptions. In the second stage, we paid particular attention to when and with whom meeting discussions took place, how individuals interacted with one another, from what perspectives they discussed the topics, and which expressions they used. Lorino et al. (2017) have used FA in strategy meeting interaction studies related to French retail sector organisations. Our goal here is more limited: to investigate how dialogicality and interactions between people are based on joint frames, how participants expand the current frame by taking various I-positions, and how frames change diachronically in conversation.

Findings

The plurality of frames was an essential element in the official life of the business investigated here. Compared to perhaps more formal organisations, such as hospitals or police stations, there were no visual clues referring to the institutional position of the employees. All the employees wore casual clothes without nameplates, and some walked freely around the office. Snacks were available in some meetings, and no formal request was needed for permission to express an opinion during a discussion. Moreover, there were no public documents, such as diplomas or quality certificates, hanging on the walls as signs of official acknowledgement of quality or excellence. This can be interpreted as a coexistence between two different frames: work and leisure. Although the office was a workplace for the employees, no formal behaviour was required. The only visible sign of
business was a decal in the front window advertising the firm to passersby. Blurriness between work and leisure time caused some problems in daily work. In one of the meetings, the leader and the employees discussed getting nameplates, which would help to differentiate the staff from the customers. The decision to use nameplates was made.

As previously stated, frames guide interactions between people, and they may change, break, or expand during ongoing activity. Discussions about the new computer-guided text message service in this study is an example of the construction of various frames in two work meetings. In our analysis, we classified the frames dealing with the text message service into three distinct types. First, in the financial frame, new technology and its use was considered in the frame of cost-efficiency, in which the economic value of technology plays a central role. Second, the pragmatic–instrumental frame underlined the utility of the service for the firm and the possibility of updates and support for the use of the service. Third, the social frame underlined the meaning of a new division of rights and responsibilities in the organisation. The use of different frames brings forth the different, collectively shared, and constructed voices. However, as our analysis demonstrates, each of these frames comes equipped with different possibilities and duties for participation.

Financial frame

A franchising business is a particular form of business for real estate and rental apartment brokerage. The franchising model has expanded in many sectors due to its characteristic features, which give competitive advantages to businesses (Tuunanen & Hyrsky, 2001). A nationwide chain offers a well-known brand, support, education, and assistance in marketing for the franchisee, who benefits from these services, pays the franchisors, and is responsible for developing a business model suitable for local markets (Flint-Hartle & de Bruin, 2010). To an extent, it is up to the franchisees how they develop and manage their firms (Cox & Mason, 2007). In small firms, even relatively small investments play a big role, and these are considered carefully in order to find the right solution regarding the financial issues. Technological innovations and new, computer-guided service systems are a way to optimise the services provided and acquire new customers in local markets.

Generally, the discussion presented in the following data extract (Extract 1) deals with the financial aspects of the firm, including themes of cost-efficiency and the business benefits of new investments. We refer to this as the financial frame, in which the common denominator is the value of possible new investments and their costs. The Goffmanian FA of accounting reviews as a social practice has illuminated the use of numbers in business negotiations between strategic partners (Lorino et al., 2017; Vollmer, 2007; Vollmer et al., 2009), but in our case, exact accounting information did not play a role to the same extent as it did in the previously studied global firms. This extract begins with the chair’s (Kirsi) question regarding one of the possible online text messaging services. This is followed by a reply by Anneli, who is a shareholder in the firm and is jointly responsible for the financial matters of the firm together with Kirsi. This is followed by a brief discussion on the matter. Five people participated in the meeting (all female): the CEO and four employees (including one shareholder). Data extracts 1 and 2 are from meeting number 2.
Extract 1.

Meeting 2 (duration: 2 hr 18 min).

Time of the extract: 1 hr 14 min 10 s–1 hr 14 min 50 s.

Speakers: Kirsi (CEO, chair, owner), Anneli (shareholder, in charge of financial matters), Heidi (employee, in charge of customer service).

1 Kirsi: well hey is the if the basic fee in that one
2 is the five hundred
3 ((looking at and facing Anneli))
4 (0.6)
5
6 Anneli: mm
7 (0.4)
8
9 Kirsi: so does it include the text message will it include
10 the text message (. ) then it will probably include text
11 messages eleven or twelve cents on top
12 ((guesses))
13
14 Anneli: ((sighs)) wait a sec (2.3)
15 ((looks at the papers))
16 it doesn’t even mention it here but THIS is
17 how I remember that the text messages
18 are not like free to s[end but
19 Kirsi: [yes right
20 Anneli: the normal it will include [the text message fee
21 Kirsi: [the text [message service
22 Heidi: [o::h
23 ((surprised))
24
25 Kirsi: [on top of that=
26 Anneli: [yes yes
27 Kirsi: =the basic charge is about five hundred
28 ((‘about’ in English))
29 Anneli: yes
30 Kirsi: at the moment our basic charge is (1.0)
31 a little over hundred [maybe
32 Anneli: [yes and th[en text messages on top of that
33 Kirsi: [I would guess so
34 Anneli: yes [I recall something like that as well
35 Kirsi: [because the messages were two-and-a-half hundred
36 Anneli: ye[s (. ) yes
37 Kirsi: [about? ([in English))
38 Anneli: yes
39 Kirsi: and then the basic charge was (. ) around a hundred
40 Anneli: mm

Data extract 1 details a discussion between Kirsi and Anneli, who were the two most active persons in discussing the financial aspects of the new online messaging service. Two voices appear in this extract. First, in lines 1–20, Kirsi and Anneli create a dialogical space in which their positions are voiced through an evaluative financial voice that orients the issue at hand towards the future. Later, in lines 21–31, Kirsi and Anneli position themselves through a descriptive voice that describes the current financial themes. This creates another dialogical space resulting in the use of I-positions that orient the issue at hand to themes that are present here and now.
Within these voices, the two team members fluctuate between and present themselves through interrelated I-positions. The evaluative financial voice is voiced through Kirsi’s declarative and descriptive I-positions (Lines 1–3 and Lines 7–8) making sense of the current situation, and through an inquiring I-position (Lines 6–7) as someone who is unaware of all the details and entitled to receive more information on the matter. Also, in lines 9–12, Anneli positions herself to the I-position of an expert and someone who is responsible to answer the previously asked question. In lines 13, 15, and 18, Kirsi aligns her I-position with Anneli’s expert position by supporting her viewpoints as Anneli continues to elaborate on the matter (Lines 14 and 17). In addition to Kirsi and Anneli, Heidi takes part in the discussion, albeit briefly. With her surprised sound in line 16, Heidi positions herself to the I-position of a surprised coworker or as someone who has just received new information. This might suggest that the lack of information on the matter had resulted in Heidi not taking part in the conversation. Although these I-positions locate the speakers within the self to different positions (e.g., I as declarative and I as unaware), these positions orient towards the future by also stating and evaluating what the topic at hand will be in the future.

The descriptive voice is also voiced through declarative and descriptive I-positions (Lines 21–23) as well as tentative I-positions (Kirsi in Line 24: “I would guess so” and Anneli in Line 25: “yes I recall something like that. . .”). Nonetheless, Kirsi quickly moves into an expert I-position by stating grounds for her previous guess (Line 26). This is followed by Anneli’s alignment with Kirsi (Lines 27 and 29) and Kirsi’s statement concerning the current state of the financial issue.

In extract 1, the number of active discussants was limited to three participants and others were silent during the meeting. This suggests that the financial frame restricted conversation. Some of the participants acted as audience in the meeting, silently following the conversation. Although there was no frame conflict or confrontation between the participants, the financial frame defined the scope of possible questions, comments, and answers. This can be understood as a specialised topic that was limited to the firm’s financial administration, possibly causing challenges for others who may have wanted to join the conversation or ask questions related to the firm’s operating costs. Kirsi and Anneli are officially responsible for finances, although other participants have the right to take part in discussion. However, the interpersonal positioning dynamics between Kirsi and Anneli (expert, declarative, descriptive, and inquiring I-positions) suggest that Anneli has the first-hand expertise and duty on this matter whereas Kirsi is in charge of strategic and operational functions of the business. The discussion is based on short questions and answers evaluating the facts and values of the new service. Utterances concerning the sums and payments were not addressed primarily to the other participants but rather to the other experts in finances (Kirsi and Anneli). Unsurprisingly, no frame-breaking and conflict took place during the conversation.

Numbers and sums are not a neutral topic to discuss; they can stir up heated debate, which can lead to new framing and reframing of the given results. Numbers are used continuously and simultaneously in strategy meetings and other types of meetings to understand the history of a situation and anticipate its potential future (Lorino et al., 2017). In our case, the financial frame typical for work meetings is more practical: the goal of discussions is to find financially sound solutions that are suitable and cheap for
the firm. No dramatic “number acts” (Vollmer, 2007) were needed in order to convince
the audience of the accuracy and importance of the investment at hand.

Pragmatic–instrumental frame

The technology-in-use or pragmatist approach to technology underlines the social, con-
structive, and processual view of the use of technology, emphasising how technological
innovations become part of ongoing activity in organisations (Nicolini, 2006; Puddephatt,
2005). This means that in order to understand the role of technology in organisations, it
is important to pay attention to the concrete ways in which people discuss, argue, and
negotiate the use of technology. As Nicolini (2006) has stressed, technologies should not
be considered as given. That is why it is essential to study the particular social and mate-
rial contexts in which technology is used. Part of this is a social and interpretative pro-
cess in which users discuss the potential use of a technical device or program.

In our case, this means a discussion of the utility of an online text message service and
the possibility of updates and support for the use of the service in the future. This consid-
eration is the core of the pragmatic–instrumental frame and is typical for users of tech-
nology or computer programs. The usefulness of an online text message service, appli-
cability to other programs, the reliability of usage, and the practical qualities of a
new service system are fundamental for the employees who will use the program in their
daily work. The following data extract depicts a discussion dealing with the comparison
of two potential service providers for the new online text message service: Maksilet and
Opti. This data extract takes place shortly after data extract 1.

Extract 2.

Meeting 2 (duration: 2 hr 18 min).

Time of the extract: 1 hr 15 min 18 s–1 hr 16 min 45 s.

Speakers: Anneli (shareholder, in charge of financial matters), Kirsi (CEO, owner, chair), Heidi
(in charge of customer service), Rita (customer service employee), Petra (customer service
employee).

1   Anneli: so then they have very similar type of service
2   but it costs (0.5) connection fee and opening fee
3   is two hundred euros licence fee one hundred and
4   fifty euros per month ongoing text messages eight
5   cents apiece
6   (1.0)
7   Kirsi: so a little cheaper than what we have at the moment
8   Anneli: yes (0.6) and like hell of a lot cheaper than what
9   this Maksilet ((laughing voice))
10  Kirsi: well what does it lack that makes Maksilet so much
11  more expensive
12  (1.6)
13  Anneli: well this Opti well uhm there at the moment the guy
that I spoke with today he didn’t know that uhm

can it be checked that has the text message been delivered

in Maksi [let I think it can been seen [from there ( ) ( ) ( ) through?

Kirsı: [yes?] [yes?

(1.2)

Anneli: and erm but he promised to check that is it possible
to [get ( ) to (Opti)

Kirsı: [can one see the that the message has been sent like

what for example at the moment what is really important

is that we know that if Terhi sends a message

((gestures towards Terhi))
today and then someone replies to that so I can also browse

all from [there ( ) oh it appears like that ( )

((gestures as if browsing a list))

Anneli: [YES yes in both services] one can see like that and

one can search by that number or can search by date

when the messages have been [sent

Heidi: [o:h okay

Kirsı: [so one can [search okay?

Anneli: [yes

search function can be [found in both (.)] [yes

Kirsı: [yes? [yes

Heidi: [( )

((spreads her arms))

Rita: [wasn’t it indeed the Maksilet that you

can see the whole conversation history [with the [one number

Anneli: [yes]

Rita: which would be hell of a lot easier one wouldn’t

have to search from there when ( ) (sent) a message

(lastly

Kirsı: [mm mm

Anneli: [yes yes (0.5), but that also in the other one this Opti has (.)

so if you search for it by the number then all the [messages

they will come under there

Petra: [yes okay right

Heidi: right

Anneli: [yes so] they can be like found from there

??: [( )]

Heidi: well that’s convenient if you can search them from

there

Anneli: [yes? yes?

The discussion between Anneli and Kirsi in the beginning of this episode (Lines 1–9) follows the financial frame as they continue talking about the finances regarding the new online technology by comparing two possible services with one another. In this part of the discussion, the I-positions are still voiced through evaluative financial voice orienting towards the offers as they currently appear. The I-positions emerge in a similar fashion as in Extract 1. For example, in lines 8 and 9, Anneli adopts an evaluative expert position by comparing the two offers by the possible providers of the text message
service. In lines 10 and 11, Kirsi inquires for more information and presents an I-position of an incubator who doesn’t seem to fully comprehend the difference between the two offers. In accordance with Extract 1, this demonstrates the interpersonal positioning dynamics between Kirsi and Anneli in which Anneli is positioned as the expert on financial issues with its responsibilities. In lines 13 and 14, Anneli introduces the voice of an outsider (“the guy that I spoke with today. . .”) describing her previous actions and establishing her epistemic stance.

In lines 21–51, the speakers introduce a collective voice of the employees. For example, in lines 22–23, Kirsi adopts an expert I-position which she voices through a collective voice (“what is really important is that we know that if. . .”) and explains the use of the text message service from the perspective of the business and their everyday practices. In return, in lines 26–28, Anneli confirms Kirsi’s statement from a perspective of expert I-position. However, this is done through a passive voice (Lines 26–27: “one can see like that and one can search. . .”) both confirming and describing the features of the service. In line 29, Heidi states her understanding with a brief comment. This is followed by the declarative I-positions of Kirsi and Anneli in lines 30–32.

Continuing with the collective voice of the employees, in lines 35–40, Rita takes part in the discussion starting with an inquiring I-position and stating details regarding one of the discussed services (Lines 35–36). In more detail, Rita uses both an evaluative and comparative voice of an employee by referring to how practicalities would be easier with the discussed service (named Maksilet). Continuing with a comparative voice, Anneli explains the differences between the two services (Opti and Maksilet), simultaneously positioning herself to an expert I-position (Lines 42–44). Finally, Anneli concludes her expert position in line 47, which is followed by Heidi’s solidifying I-position, in which she aligns with Anneli’s I-position by referring to the just-explained practicalities. In this extract, the voice of the employees is contrasted with the financial and operational voices of Kirsi and Anneli. This can be interpreted as highlighting the interpersonal relations and responsibilities within the business.

The repertoire of I-positions was more dynamic and open in the case of the pragmatic–instrumental frame. This suggests that all participants approved of the frame as a standpoint for discussion. The frame was not broken, frozen, shifted, changed, or challenged during the conversation. Discussion expanded to various practical questions connected to the practicality and use of the program. This demonstrates the subtle and dynamic way the participants orient the discussion and adopt new frames as the transition to the new frame takes place implicitly in the ongoing interaction.

As stated, the second extract deals with the quality of the new service and its usability in daily work. This aroused more discussion between the participants, and all the participants joined the conversation. The participants evaluated the use of the service in relation to customers, marketing, and the program they were using already. Most of the questions and answers were related to the features the system offered for communication, such as checking on upcoming text messages, searching and accessing information concerning earlier text messages, and a high-quality working login protocol. These features are important for daily work in a real estate and rental apartment brokerage business, allowing it to maintain updated contact with possible customers. The discussion was pragmatic and ordered through an attempt to find useable alternatives to the old text message
service. The discussion of the use of the online text message service in the firm’s activities can be interpreted as a user frame expansion from daily brokerage work to more general tasks in the firm’s operations.

The pragmatic–instrumental frame illustrates how a nonhuman artificial object (in this case, an online text message service) becomes part of a workplace’s activities. The user frame changes nonhuman objects into familiars, and there is no distinction between the user and the service. The evaluation of the usability has an important meaning before a final decision is made. This is why this topic produced quite a few questions in the meeting, as well as comparisons to the services the firm was already using. Chreim (2006) has underlined the difference between managerial and employee accounts to technological changes in the banking sector. This duality did not have any significance in the work meetings; all the participants had, in Chreim’s (2006) terminology, a willing appropriation frame, which was identical to the managerial frame’s general ideas of better and faster customer service.

Social frame

Technologies or new information systems are never socially neutral, as they enable people to do their work in different ways compared to earlier scripts. In this respect, the use of a new online text message service required some changes in the division of work and discussion of how the rights and responsibilities are distributed throughout the organisation. The new service also brought new tasks, and the content of this discussion was related to the various practical questions that are essential for the maintenance and use of the service. We call this social negotiation over rights and responsibilities a social frame. As stated previously, Nicolini (2006) has studied telemedicine from the social and articulative approach, which underlines the interpretative work related to the use of various technologies and the discussions over redistributing and delegating tasks.

In our example, the size of the firm and the quality of the online text message service did not imply drastic or large-scale changes in daily work due to the nature of the real estate and rental apartment brokerage business. The employees do not have any special education for the work, as in the case of medical staff, and most brokerage work is done individually. However, even slight transformations demand new social contracts to determine who is responsible for certain tasks and who has the right to use services. Data extract 3 is from meeting number 4. Seven people participated in the meeting: the CEO, four employees (including one shareholder), and two interns (six female, one male).

Extract 3.

Meeting 4 (duration: 1 hr 5 min).

Time of the extract: 11 min 22 s–12 min 30 s.

Speakers: Kirsi (CEO, owner, chair), Anneli (shareholder, in charge of financial matters), Petra (customer service employee), Rita (customer service employee).
Kirsi: so if we must get access from downstairs to send a text message and someone isn’t in with those user[names] [so erm
Anneli: [mm [mm ((nods))
Petra: for almost every computer just one of those (. ) own username then won’t like even start changing [it
Anneli: [mm
Kirsi: yes yes exactly that’s what I was like thinking about so [that would be the easiest.
Petra: [so that then that would be like just (. ) it is the seven probably ((guesses the amount of possible usernames))
Anneli: mm
Kirsi: ye[yes
Anneli: or is there a need to (. ) [that gets thrown out
Kirsi: [yes
Anneli: [yes
Kirsi: indeed
Anneli: mm
Kirsi: hey could you ask that erm that does it cost more if there are ten usernames
Anneli: yes (1.3) () ((writes something down))
Kirsi: that is it that kind of that it just like then includes [but if it is
Anneli: [yes
Kirsi: like so that the offer is like for five usernames and that’s that so then we just do it arrange [it like that five usernames are enough
Petra: [mm

Extract 3 depicts a discussion about the new arrangements related to the use of the firm’s computers and online text message service. Primarily, themes related to these
practicalities are discussed (Lines 1–37), but issues related to the future tasks of the employees are also dealt with (Lines 38–46). In lines 1 and 2, Kirsi starts with a descriptive I-position through which she positions herself as evaluator of future practices as well as a facilitator for discussion. In her position, Kirsi refers to a collective voice in which shared practices of the future are discussed. This creates a dialogical space in which different I-positions become possible (e.g., I as an employee, I as an evaluator). Anneli aligns with Kirsi in line 3, which is followed by Petra’s suggestion regarding future practices continuing with the collective voice. In lines 7 and 8, Kirsi agrees with Petra and positions herself to a reflexive I-position in which she evaluates her previous actions and how they might have possibly been misunderstood by others (Line 7: “exactly that’s what I was like thinking about. . .”). After this, in line 9, Petra concludes with a suggestive I-position by stating what the best practice in the future might be.

While using a collective voice in which the shared practices of the future are discussed, in lines 12, 15, and 17, Rita evaluates the future practices by relating them to the current practices. From these descriptive and employee-related I-positions, Rita questions the previously stated best practices for the future. In line 18, Kirsi aligns with this position by referring to other previous experiences (using the key register, in Line 18) and uses the voice of a possible user by imitating someone else (Lines 18 and 20, “whose is open close it I want to go”). This is followed by Anneli’s suggestion regarding the possible use of computers in the future and provides a possible solution for the future practice. In lines 26–37, Kirsi and Anneli continue to evaluate possible future practices through evaluative voice and descriptive and evaluative I-positions. In lines 38 and 39, Kirsi suggests that perhaps Anneli could make some further inquiries regarding the possible providers of the text message service. In this position (I as facilitator), Kirsi orients toward future tasks of the employees and their positions (Anneli as responsible for taking initiative and making further inquiries) and also orients towards a possible outcome through a collective voice (Line 44: “then we just do it. . .”). This further establishes the interrelated positions and interpersonal relations of the employees in which Kirsi oversees allocating duties to others.

The social frame sets a new kind of dynamic multiplicity between the discussants. Three of the participants are active and bringing their own contribution to the conversation. The social frame is easy to understand for the participants; it opens possibilities for joint discussion and generates views of the possible ways of making the program workable for all the users. In this frame, participants are active interlocutors trying to find practical solutions for using the computers, determining how many licences they need, and the login protocol to be used in future. The social frame is close to the pragmatic–instrumental frame but differs from it in the fact that participants interactionally agree and discuss social and individual rights and responsibilities. In this way, they construct new agreements on practices and norms to guide their daily work. New computer programs and services can essentially change the scripts for daily work or just add a minor practice to ongoing activities.

In this respect, new arrangements can cause conflict or lead to reframing between different professionals if the changes transform current work dramatically. However, this conversation is based on mutual consensus on the importance of changes. It does not
bring any changes to individual work scripts, as in the case of more extensive technological changes in, for instance, healthcare consultation practices (Nicolini, 2006; Pappas & Seale, 2009). While discussing the number of licences they need, for example, the participants estimated the use of the new online text message service in the firm’s future. The frame is both social and individual, but social and organisational dimensions dominate the conversation. During the episode, the participants described the current, socially shared practices (Lines 15–17) and made suggestions (Line 18) and reformulations (Lines 22–25) regarding the adoption of the text message service. A brief dialogue between Kirsi and Anneli at the end of the extract (Lines 38–45) relates to task allocation in future.

As stated, the introduction of new computer and video-guided technological systems can have a considerable impact on the work scripts of different professionals. The social frame deals with questions of co-operative work. In this context, agreements refer to the same thing as in Menold’s (2009) study on technological frames in work. In our study, the participants negotiated openly about daily practices, which enhanced the development of a shared social frame in the workplace. The content of the conversation signals dependency between the actors. This means that individual employees are dependent on their coworkers while using the new text message service. Despite their heterogenous job positions, participants succeeded in jointly constructing a shared social frame in the work meetings. Due to earlier experiences with online text message services, the participants possibly had the same type of assumptions, expectations, and knowledge.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to analyse dialogicality by using naturalistic data from real-life settings to broaden individual-level analysis to a more social and contextual understanding of workplace interaction. DST has revealed the malleability of the human self by underlining our ability to take different I-positions toward our actions. In Hermans’ (2001, 2018) studies, “the society of mind” refers to the fact that the human mind is formed of imaginary interpretations of the surrounding social world. From the perspective of FA, there is also a multitude of frames in social situations that guide our actions. Goffman’s approach provides tools to understand group-level actions as emergent and situational based on a frame that gives sense to micro-level interactions between individuals. According to Goffman (1986), individuals co-ordinate their actions according to frames, and these frames are not only mental constructions.

Thinking of DST, positioning theory, and discursive psychology, it is essential to notice that our understanding of social situations is grounded in the primality of the social frame, which makes interaction between individuals possible. In everyday life, individuals are usually able to understand the quality of social situations without any problems because they have discursive knowledge of the culture and society in which they live, and their perceptions are frame-accurate. This interprets social situations as meaningful for the individuals. Individuals’ thinking may be deluded, illusionary, or deceived, but normally we are aware of social situations and become spontaneously engrossed in them (Goffman, 1986). The ability to move within and between different
frames, to modify, expand, combine, clarify, change, or break frames, is a prerequisite for interaction. As Moore et al. (2011) state, the stability of self is anchored to the ability to move between frames. Generally speaking, frames can be classified into broader, value-based master frames, interactionally emerged frames, situational or process frames, and cognitive frames (Kim, 2013; Sandvik et al., 2017; Tannen & Wallat, 1987).

The main contribution of this article to the discussion of dialogical research is to outline the usefulness of DST and FA in analysing small-group interactions in everyday settings. FA leads to more social understanding of the human self than does DST. There is no sharing or exchange between dialogic selves without a joint frame in social situations. According to FA, the ability to understand the social world and participate in different primary social frames is a psychobiological process in which the subject loses partial control over feelings and cognitive attention (Goffman, 1986). Involvement in framed activity may vary from boredom to full engagement, and an individual’s relation to a frame can vary from unclear to clear. In meetings and other types of workplace interactions, it is enough that participants have the same understanding of the situation and “a tolerably correct view of other’s views, which includes their view of this view,” as Goffman (1986, p. 338) puts it. A dialogue is always a compromise. DST however, shows how participants are active and able to take new I-positions and bring new issues to the conversation. At the same time, their repertoire of I-positions may be rather limited due to the frame or voice that guides the conversation.

According to DST, the origin of I-positions is in socially defined and organised social positions offered by society, which can become part of a personal position repertoire and vice versa: innovative personal positions can change into social positions by transforming society (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In this respect, the variety of I-positions based on the internalisation of social positions certainly helps managers to be flexible in social interactions and suitably fit their actions into social situations. As earlier research shows, there is considerable variation in frames guiding action in healthcare and primary education (Everingham et al., 2006; Peräkylä, 1989; Puriola, 2002; Virkki et al., 2015). Our findings demonstrate similar kinds of multiplicity of frames within a particular theme in a business context. Naturalistic data in a working life context opens a multilayered reality of frames that are connected to the nonhuman and human objects of everyday actions. The multiplicity of frames is not a problem in everyday interaction. FA sheds light on the different meanings that the participants have created for an ongoing subject, but in meetings and other working life practices people also take personal distance, ask questions, and find new perspectives to the current frame in joint discussion.

**Conclusion**

DST and FA offer researchers of dialogical selves a fruitful method for further studies on meeting interactions in workplace settings, in which people discuss and argue topics related to their work. In our study, the focus has been on the dynamics of interactionally emerging frames in multiparty interactions. Previous DST-oriented analyses of interactions have focused on dyadic situations or individual-level analysis of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001; Moore et al., 2011; Raggatt, 2015). Compared to these analyses,
Goffman’s FA offers tools to conceptualise the connection between symbolic order and individuals’ interpretations of situations in a more detailed way. The frames of interactions expand and change through diachronically footing and keying. A change of frame creates new expectations for interactions and allows individuals to be skilful in understanding others’ views, finding solutions, avoiding conflicts, and expanding their current frames.

This study leads to two considerations regarding future research. First, as Jasper et al. (2011) have stated, there is a need for additional methodology in order to understand the complementary nature of inter- and intra-personal dialogues in the context of DST. In this respect, there is also a need for a methodology in which many dialogical selves are considered in interpersonal dialogue. Second, as dialogueical approaches, both DST and FA provide complementary frameworks in studying social interactions. On the one hand, FA gives tools to understand the social or collective dynamics of interaction and individual differences in meanings. On the other hand, DST illuminates the microlevel interaction movements based on I-positioning in dialogical encounters. This means that the level of collective voices or social frames has been underdeveloped in DST. Analogously, FA does not pay attention to the relatively autonomous role of I-positioning, although the personal and individual side of interaction is mentioned in it.

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Note
1. The data used in this article have not been published previously. We have permission to use and publish the verbally transcribed data. Anonymisation was not required by the participants, but the names of all people in the firm that appear in this article are pseudonyms. Furthermore, to guarantee anonymity, specific details about the firm and its business have not been discussed in the article.

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