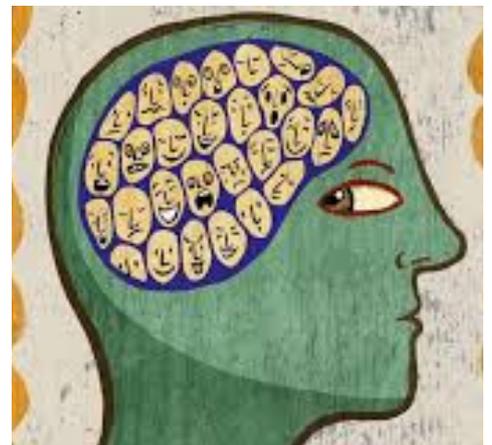# Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

January – March 2026

Working with Multiple Selves

Executive summary

This QRL is slightly longer than usual, and so we will provide signposts. In the first part of the paper we outline three theories of multiplicity. There are hundreds of theories, but we've chosen three quite different theories to illustrate some fundamental differences. We suggest there are three types of theory: phenomenological, neurological and integrative/philosophical. Don't be put off by the word *phenomenological*; it basically means theories based on personal experience.

Then we share the results of our research. We interviewed 25 people about their perspectives on multiplicity. We recruited our respondents through an article posted on LinkedIn. Nearly all the respondents were coaches, the majority of whom had some degree of familiarity with at least one theory of multiplicity. Richard Schwartz's theories on Internal Family Systems were most often cited. The respondents had some quite different perspectives on multiplicity, which we relate back to the theories we present in part one.

Finally we summarise our findings and present some practical suggestions as to how coaches can expand their own awareness of all these different approaches to multiplicity, and best leverage that knowledge in helping their clients become more self aware, confident, capable and effective. The more theories/stories we are aware of, the more helpful we become.

Introduction

Most of us have an intuitive sense of being the one entity, but this intuitive sense is the only real evidence to support this idea of a single self. There is more evidence to support the idea that we are not one, but many. Multiplicity theories have been around since at least as far back as Plato, who spoke of the rational self, the appetite, and the spirit. Since then many, many, writers have expounded theories of multiplicity[i].

To help their clients gain fresh insights into the issues they bring to coaching, many coaches encourage their coachees to explore aspects of self, to become more self-aware. Many of those coachees, not versed in multiplicity theory, will approach the task from a single-person perspective. In other words, a perspective that says there is only one me, and my task is to gain further insight into the functioning of the real/authentic/true self. But we are more complex than these unitary perspectives suggest. There are lots of psychometric tools out there, most offering a somewhat one-dimensional perspective as to who we are. It isn't until we consider the possibility that we are multidimensional that we are able to delve deeper into the topic of self. To help the client become more self-aware may therefore require the client to become more *selves*-aware, to entertain the possibility of multiplicity. The idea of multiplicity doesn't make sense to a lot of people, at least initially. People are more likely to engage with the idea if it is presented in a way that makes sense to them. The task for the coach is to be able to 'meet the client where they are' which may require a familiarity with a range of different theories and approaches.

In this paper we present the outcome of a piece of research we conducted at the end of last year. We spoke to 25 people, mostly coaches, to ask them about their relationship with the idea of multiplicity. These people responded to an invitation to participate posted on LinkedIn. In this paper we present the outcome of that research in service of helping you, the coach, to better engage others in exploring their own perspectives on multiplicity.

A Multiplicity of Multiplicity Theories

There are hundreds of different multiplicity theories. Here we will briefly outline three theories, each an example of a particular category of theory. The first category we explore is **phenomenological**. Many of these theories are psychodynamic in origin and have their roots in people's *first-person experience*. The second category is **neurological**, based on perspectives as to how the brain works. The third category is **integrative/philosophical**, drawing on a range of theories and, in some cases, the philosophical tradition. The distinction between these three categories is not rigid but the distinction is useful we think, in framing some of the differences between theories.

Phenomenological - Richard Schwartz[ii]

Schwartz was writing at the time as a therapist, working mostly with people suffering from bulimia. Schwartz's perspective is phenomenological in that he says that *"clients are the experts of their experiences"*. He describes a period of his life when he refused to read other people's accounts of multiplicity for fear they might get in the way of those stories told to him by his clients.

Let us now highlight some key aspects of Schwartz's writings. First, his belief in the existence of a 'true' or 'core' self and accompanying parts. This true self is the seat of consciousness which Schwartz compares to the conductor of an orchestra. The other players in the orchestra, the sub-personalities (or parts), are all valuable and want to play constructive inner roles. Schwartz uses the term parts more often than he does the term sub-personalities because his clients prefer to use that word. He says he is open to using whatever terms best work for his clients, but whatever the part is called, it refers to a discrete and autonomous mental system. These parts can all be grouped into one of three categories: Exiles, Managers and Firefighters, and the ultimate purpose of all three categories is to protect the self.

Second, these different parts interact. They engage with each other and the therapist's role is to effectively intervene in the dynamics of those relationships and, ultimately, to enable the self to perform the same role. The self may be fully differentiated from all of the parts, in which case the individual may experience themselves as a single entity. When the person is unhappy however, it may be because the self is not fully differentiated and the parts don't trust the self to play its natural leadership role effectively.

Third, these parts are animate. They are clearly visible and often have quite distinct and striking appearances. If someone can't see their parts clearly then it may be because: i) that part is hiding and doesn't want to be seen, or ii) it may be too identified with the self, or iii) other parts are getting in the way. Many, if not all, of these parts can speak; one patient is said to have reported hearing *"a multitude of inner voices."* The therapist too can talk to those parts directly.

Neurological - Guy Claxton[iii]

Guy Claxton is a cognitive scientist. He compares the neuron, the basic unit of the brain, to a hundred-legged octopus, piled up in a heap with lots of octopuses, tentacles extended to make contact with others in the pile. The octopuses are organised into groups (or assemblies) that turn on and off in unison, stimulated to do so by other assemblies. The total 'wakefulness' of the entire community is finite, such that there will always be some assemblies switched on and some assemblies switched off. There is no privileged assembly directing affairs, no equivalent to a little person inside of us. The process is self-organised, a constant sequence of switching on and off, responding, acting, and prioritising, that arises from the overall design and state of the system. Each of Claxton's assemblies ties together a particular package of knowledge, skills, and experiences, that serves a particular purpose, when called upon.

Different assemblies are called upon by different events in the environment, and those assemblies that are awoken, tend to inhibit other assemblies.

These assemblies interact with each other mostly outside of our consciousness. Language is important here. Our ancestors lived in small communities, and it was important for members of those communities to work together effectively. This required an ongoing process of checking-in and getting to know each other. In small communities this was achieved through processes such as mutual grooming, but as the size of these communities grew, so a new process was required. Community members simply didn't have time to all groom each other. This is how language evolved, Claxton says, as a means by which people could communicate more widely. As language evolved so did the capacity for internal brain assemblies to communicate with each other, and so thinking emerged. But only some brain assemblies developed this capacity to communicate.

Who is 'I' through this lens? Why do we experience a unitary sense of self? Because in order to navigate our physical environment, we need a sense of place, and of the entities within it. Language and consciousness enable us to think in terms of 'things' and if the world is inhabited by things, then we too must be a thing. But the way we think and respond is modular and fragmented, and so a 'self-system' has evolved in the brain, whose task it is to manage this story of who I am. Claxton compares this self-system to a radio in the background, an ever-present commentator, or narrator, describing and interpreting events in real-time. We experience the self as the I, a conscious unitary being managing events with a clear, consistent, rationale. In reality however, the self-system is but a part of the brain, connected only to some other parts of the brain through an 'internal linguistic telephone exchange'. The narrator is committed to creating a fiction of coherence and consistency without having access to much – or most – of what else is happening in the brain. It identifies whichever selves happen to be activated at any one time, affirming each of those selves as 'I'. The conceit of the self-system lies in its belief that it makes free choices and conscious decisions, whereas in fact many of the brain's functional systems and sub-systems operate outside conscious thought.

What then of consciousness? Claxton suggests that consciousness evolved in response to a need to detect and respond to emergencies. All non-essential systems are shut down and active areas of the brain become 'super-excited' hot spots and consciousness emerged as a by-product. These original moments of consciousness were fleeting to begin with but further evolved as an effective means by which to respond to lower-level risk. Consciousness then is an outcome of particular parts of the brain being highly stimulated, while other parts of the brain are closed down and dormant.

Integrative/Philosophical - **Tatiana Bachkirova[iv]**

Bachkirova frames the self as a 'philosophical puzzle', drawing on the work of Descartes, Berkeley, Reid and many others in reviewing different stories of self: self as operator, the idea that there is no self, and stories of evolving self. Like Claxton, she dismisses the notion of a central operator, a homunculus (Latin for 'little man'). If there is a little operator in charge of us, then who is in charge of the little man? And then who is in charge of the little man who is in charge of the little man etc. Her DSA theory (Development of Self in Action) is quite consistent with the neurological perspective. She suggests there are three specific aspects of self:

1. **The relationship between the conscious mind and the rest of the organism.** The role of the conscious mind is to think and make sense of the world, though it is the rest of the organism that engages with the environment and acts. The conscious mind thinks it is in charge. It feels a sense of

agency and control. But though the conscious processing of information contributes to action, the capacity of our unconscious mind to process is far greater, as is its influence on action.

2. **Multiplicity.** The ego consists of mini-selves, most of which are not conscious. The mini-self is a particular pattern of links between different areas of the brain that become activated or inhibited when the organism is engaged in a certain act. This pattern includes sensation, memory, and meaning making. The mini-self is comparable to a group of Claxton's octopuses. Some mini-selves are relatively simple, and others more complex, but none of them are 'king'. The ego, as Bachkirova uses the term, is the cumulative result of the working of the mini-selves. How is their activity coordinated if there is no supervisory self? Bachkirova agrees with Claxton, that unification happens through collaboration. That collaboration may be relatively undeveloped or advanced, such that the ego may be unformed, formed or reformed.

3. **A narrator.** The narrator is a mini-self whose function it is to make sense of the activities of the other mini-selves, comparable to Gazzaniga's 'interpreter'[v]. The narrator is not a homunculus, but a maker of stories, able to look outside and see how others react to us, able to connect with how some of the other mini-selves are thinking and feeling. The narrator feels in control, whereas it is entirely uninformed as to the activities of some other of the mini-selves. The narrator operates through language.

Bachkirova dedicates much of her book to the story of the *evolving* self, and is aimed specifically at the coach, outlining key principles of developmental coaching, her approach again underpinned by a commitment to philosophical traditions of critical thinking.

Five Questions

There are many differences between the theories described. Here we will focus on five.

1. **Numbers**
   Schwartz envisages five to 15 parts[vi]. John Rowan, another phenomenologist, suggested we have somewhere between one and 20 sub-personalities, with an average of around six or seven. Other writers have reported averages of 3.5[vii] and seven[viii]. The neurologists suggest we have a multitude of different selves, some being conscious and others not. Most are unconscious and their number is not restricted in any way[ix].

2. **Names**
   Schwartz writes of parts, because that is the term that best resonates with clients. He refers to them also as sub-personalities. A part is a discrete and autonomous metal system. Guy Claxton writes of assemblies and mini-theories, groups of neurons working together to achieve a particular purpose. Bachkirova writes of mini-selves, particular patterns of links between different areas of the brain.

3. **Structure**
   Schwartz says we have parts and we have a self. The self is the seat of consciousness, and the role of the parts is to protect the self. The parts interact with each other and with the self. For Claxton the conscious self is a self-system functioning alongside other self-systems, performing a narrative function and identifying with whichever assemblies are activated at any one time. Bachkirova's perspective is similar. There are multiple mini-selves, some of which are conscious and some are not, and it is the function of the narrator (a mini-self) to make sense of all the other mini-selves.

4. **Personification**

   Schwartz says that the parts are animate, visible, and have striking appearances. The therapist is encouraged to personify the parts and to give them character and voice. The neurologists are wary of attempts to personify different parts of the brain. Taken too far, this may suggest that we as people are made up lots of little people (homunculi), in which case we now need to explain how the little people function – do they comprise a set of little-little people, and do those little-little people comprise of little-little-little people, and so on. Bachkirova's perspective is similar.

5. **Evolution and growth**

   Schwartz compares the newborn human to a new basketball team. Lots of raw talent, but members of the team have yet to get to know each other and learn how to work together optimally. The successful development of the human system relies to an extent on the external environment. The therapist can play a useful role in this process.

   Rowan[x], another phenomenologist describes in some detail the development of sub-personalities through a sequence of stages. The individual starts life, pre-birth, with a singular 'OK' self. That OK self splits as an outcome of experiencing trauma and as a means by which to defend a loss of self. In subsequent stages the new 'not-OK' self becomes populated by separated sub-regions, again this being a defensive process triggered by trauma. Some of those sub-regions are ring-fenced and deliberately forgotten, as later on are some of the subpersonalities built up during adolescence. The individual is embarked upon a quest to identify a true singular self until later on in the process when some more enlightened individuals feel able to explore some of the selves they earlier ring-fenced, accept that they are not perfect, and relax into being more spontaneous and vulnerable.

   The neurologists see the brain as plastic, an energy system attuned to the environment, constantly in motion and able to adapt – to some extent. At the same time Claxton writes of 'myths of maturity', the idea that people become increasingly autonomous as they grow older. Most of us, he says, have deep roots in the particular world of our childhood, its physical and social environment.

   Like Rowan, Bachkirova writes at length about the developing self. Leveraging theories of adult development, she defines developmental change as the enhanced capacity to deal with and influence the environment and to tend internal needs and aspirations. People evolve in the way they make meaning of the world, and this development is multi-dimensional. The cognitive line of development is the capacity to take perspectives. People progress through stages of cognitive development, stages which have been variously described, but can be simplified into thinking about the:

   - Dependent (a dependence on others for their approval)
   - Independent (a greater reliance on self)
   - Inter-independent (a more flexible and holistic way of thinking)

   Bachkirova describes three similar stages of development with reference to the ego: the network of mini-selves. The first stage is the *unformed ego*, in which some mini-selves are still to develop. The person lacks confidence in self, and so may overly invest in others and/or retreat behind defensive boundaries. By the *formed ego* stage, more of the mini-selves have developed, and the person has developed a greater sense of control and self-ownership, sometimes to the extent of isolating themselves from others. By the *reformed ego* stage all of the mini-selves are fully developed and there is a greater recognition of the existence and functioning of the unconscious. People are less

attached to being right or being on control, and the individual is more comfortable with ambiguity and change.

Our Research

As Bachkirova points out, it is important to distinguish between accounts of the actual mini-selves and the stories we tell ourselves about those mini-selves. Phenomenological accounts are by definition stories, no matter how certain the authors may be as to the validity of those stories. Neurological accounts attempt to define the actual selves, a significant challenge according to Claxton given that *"the human mind is a closed book,"* yet we are *"creatures of belief"* and *"we think we know ourselves ... or could know ourselves … intimately and directly."* The neurologists therefore have little faith in Schwartz's view that *"clients are the experts of their experiences"*. In this study few, if any, of the people interviewed engaged us in a conversation around the neurology of self. Everybody shared their personal experience of self, their self-as-story.

Before reviewing how people engaged with the five questions, it is helpful to understand the origins of people's stories. One source of story is theory. The 25 respondents named 12 between them, of which Schwartz's work was mentioned most often (10 times), followed by Bachkirova (five times), and Jung and Freud (twice each). People were most familiar with phenomenological and psychodynamic perspectives.

1. **Numbers**
   On the face of it, respondent's answers were consistent with the phenomenologists. People named between three and 20 selves, with an average of 8.4 selves, and no one talked about there being an unlimited number of selves. This isn't necessary incompatible with a neurological/philosophical perspective however, given that both Claxton and Bachkirova say that the majority of assemblies/mini-selves are subconscious, without being specific as to how many conscious entities there might be.

2. **Names**
   The 25 respondents chose 16 different terms by which to name their different sub-entities. Some people used more than one term. Parts was by far the most popular descriptor, followed by selves, personas, and subpersonalities (figure 1). No-one used the phrase mini-selves specifically.
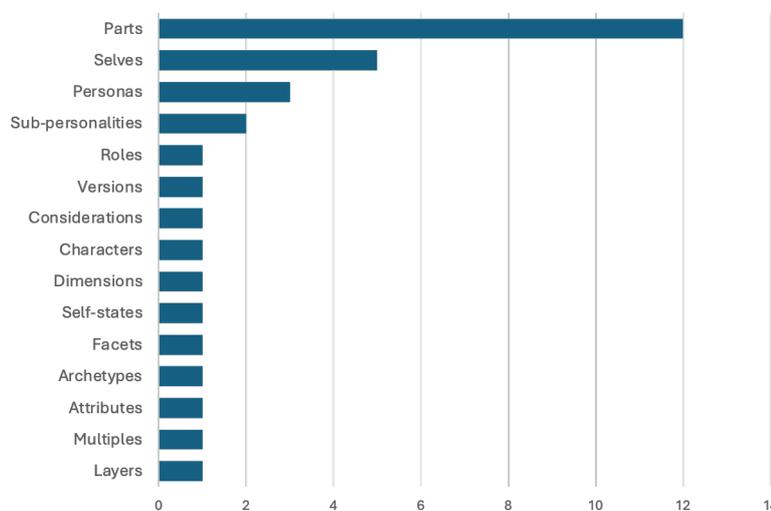

Figure 1: Terminology

The fact that people overall preferred the word part suggests an allegiance with Schwartz's views, but it may just endorse Schwartz's view that many people just prefer the word part. At least a few did associate the term with Schwartz's work. For example:

> "I think it's just because I'm familiar with the Internal Family Systems framework."

> "I see self as being kind of like a culmination of all your parts. Self is like who you are, at your core, and your parts are sometimes acting on their own without consulting the community, which is your self."

But for most the word part just felt more appropriate, even for some people more familiar with other theories:

> "I just came off a session with someone, and I was talking about the different parts that made up who he is, I find that more accessible."

> "Parts resonates more for me, because people understand better. When I talk with people about sub personalities, people can get a little bit afraid."

> "Mini-selves is Tatiana's idea. I'm not saying that her terminology doesn't resonate with me. It's quite simplistic and it gets to the point. But … there's always the danger using terminology like that, of associations with multiple personality disorder and the psychological aspect of it."

One respondent directly contrasts a phenomenological perspective with a more philosophical perspective:

> "When I conceptualise it, I conceptualise them as selves … but when I talk about it from first person experience, I know I say the word parts more. So, what I describe for myself would be a part of me, but when I think about it, I would describe it better as selves."

Some other perspectives explained:

> "I put down characters, characters on the bus. If you think of yourself as a bus driving down the highway of life, at certain points in time, different characters seize hold of the steering wheel."

> "I prefer states [because] it really captures the fleeting nature of these states and the way that we can move through them pretty dynamically and in a way that we're not necessarily in control of."

> "I like the word multiples because it challenges this notion of there being one authentic self."

3. **Structure**

i. **Is there a separate self in addition to parts?**
Schwartz says that there is, whereas both Claxton and Bachkirova point out the logical inconsistency of postulating a homunculus. About a third of respondents aligned with Schwartz in saying that they experience a separate self in addition to their parts. This entity was variously called self, soul, relational self, integrating self, essence of self, superego, lighthouse, and 'my DNA'. Another third said that there was one organising entity, which was also one of their parts. This entity was called narrator, ring-master, or a specific other self named earlier in the interview. Another third people said that there was no separate self, and all of the parts functioned collaboratively. Interestingly, only four of the 10 people who named Schwartz as a source talked about the existence of a separate self.

ii. **Do your selves have language – do they speak to you?**

Schwartz says that a therapist can communicate directly with a client's parts directly. Claxton and Bachkirova both suggest that there is a part or self that performs a central narrative function. Twenty-one respondents answered this question, of whom 13 said that at least one of their parts spoke to them, though there was a grey area; some people seemed a bit unsure as to whether those parts really spoke to them, or whether the nature of communication wasn't best described using words like 'sensing'. Of those who said they did hear voices, five said that just one voice spoke to them, while nine said they heard from multiple voices, again a leaning toward the phenomenological. We asked a similar question, asking people who we were talking to in the moment. Six people referred to a separate self, six people named a specific part, and 10 said the interviewer was talking to a combination of different parts.

iii. **Do your different parts interact?**

It may be helpful here to think in terms of a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum all the different parts of self work together in a very organised way:

> *"There is this orchestra pit, and lots of different instruments playing. There isn't a single person at the front, it's more kind of like every part is operating together. Sometimes I feel that there are people who are taking the lead, but it feels like it's all part of the same thing. I can pull people out to have them play a quartet and they can play a nice piece without the whole orchestra. But they always kind of like fall back into that whole pit."*

The majority of people talked about patterns or systems of interaction, with sonly ome selves interacting with some other selves:

> *"They do interact with each other, but there are quite a lot of polarities. The [a-part] comes in and starts to figure things out. Then the [b-part] comes in and says it needs to be done quickly. And that's three parts figuring it out with [c-part] and there are some other parts that link up as an inner critic. [Parts d, e and f] often work together but [g-part] is often on its own. It can collaborate with others, but it doesn't often."*

Some people expressed a desire for their selves to work together more effectively:

> *"Just the recent coaching session I did with a new client, I could see all five popping up. One self is about creating rapport and relationship. Another, fiercer, self can show up in tandem with being loving and connected, but I have to create the space to be able to move between both very intentionally. [x-self] rarely shows up with [y-self], but I think that she should. It would be nice to be able to bring them in more intentionally."*

> *"In my opinion the objective of identifying these parts, is not to be able to analyze them individually, what is important is that they come together in a functional, optimum way, to work as a team."*

At the other end of the spectrum, the different parts of self don't interact at all:

> *"They don't interact. I can put them next to each other, but they don't interact. I've never seen that. I've seen them together in a space like sitting in a circle."*

"It's like a Russian doll effect. It's sequential in the way that the layers have been built up. It's like little me is over here, and 12- or 13-year-old me is over there, and they don't really connect with each other."

iv. What is the process through which it is decided which part is managing things in the moment?

The neurologists would say that this process is unconscious, that the self-system (or narrator), the voice of self, is not connected to all the other assemblies or mini-selves. It thinks it's in charge, but it isn't.

Some respondents did describe an orchestrator, which for some people was the same as the narrator:

"The characters on the bus take the wheel. The organising character has to recognise when the wheel has been hijacked, then initiate the conversation with the character who's hijacked the bus and talked them down off the ledge. I'd call that the integrating self."

"The narrator is the one with the voice, the wise one. That's the one in the driver's seat."

Others suggest that the organising self is in control only some of the time:

"That's [x-self]'s role but sometimes there's a coup and one of the other selves takes over and that may only be for a certain amount of time."

Others are more aligned with a neurological/philosophical perspective, saying that the narrator's sense of control is illusory:

"A lot of this is subconscious. Some people talk about a narrator, who knows what's going on, but actually it doesn't. I don't think my central self always uses words and conscious thought to make a choice, nor is it as rational as I'd like it to be."

Some would agree the process is largely subconscious but believe they can assert more control as they become older and wiser:

"I think it's fairly unconscious is the first thing. I think that the selves that pop in are largely unconscious, triggered by the conversation or the context or who I'm with. But I'm getting better at recognising when I need to bring them in more deliberately and I think that is my development journey."

Others feel the process is collaborative, with no need for a conductor, a view very much aligned with Claxton. If there is a narrator, the narrator's role is to voice, not to organise.

"I don't feel like there is an orchestrator. No one is trying to take charge."

4. Personification

Schwartz says that the parts are animate, visible, and have striking appearances. Claxton and Bachkirova point to the same logical problem with such a perspective: if there is a little person inside of us, we need to explain how that little person functions.

Many people did personify their internal entities. One person, for example, spoke of subpersonalities each with a mind of their own. One of these selves was a *"show off, deeply competitive, with things to prove."* Another was an *"intrepid journalist, also a trapeze artist."* Another spoke of *"a teenager, quite loud and very angry. She finds it hard to shut up and definitely doesn't want to listen,"* and of *"[a part who is] about 10 and sits quietly on a bench. She doesn't*

mind talking with me, but she doesn't have to say a lot. She's just a bit disappointed." Another described a part of themselves which is *"young, innocent, fresh-faced, cheery, positive, kind, mindful of others, sensitive, keen to please everyone."* Many parts/selves had their own names, specific ages, appearances and ways of dressing. Some people were more reluctant to personify their different entities in this way, describing them more as states of being, such as angry, concerned, outraged etc., or solely in terms of their function, such as nurturing, intuitive, creative, or empathetic. Some of those people found it harder to personify these entities in the same way. One person didn't like the notion of personification at all:

> *"I don't know if you've ever seen YouTube videos of people who claim to have this. I don't doubt that they believe this and they've classified these states, but I think it's a very unhelpful exercise. When someone says well, there's a little girl 13, she's called Carol, and she comes out sometimes at the supermarket, and she does this. And then there's Eileen, who's 19. And they've like, literally named 10 different personalities, I think, Jesus Christ, what the f*** did your psychotherapist do to you?"*

5. **Evolution and growth**

We asked people when each of their selves first appeared, which proved to be a difficult question for most people to answer. People were often more comfortable taking about when they first became *aware* of a particular part of self. It is at that point in time that they characterised that self in the form of a story.

Some of the parts people described had been there forever or from early childhood:

> *"The daughter part still exists, despite the fact that my parents are not alive. So I'm no longer a daughter to anybody in this physical world. But I still have a part, which is the daughter part and doesn't disappear, just because the associated relationships do."*

Others emerged later in life. The emergence of a self may have been evoked by, for example, the environment in which we grew up:

> *"Maybe this part comes because I grew up in a social country and a communistic country. And a desire for freedom and going against the rules and wanting to live in a place that makes you experience freedom in a different level. The place I live embraces freedom in many ways you cannot experience other places."*

Or changes in our body:

> *"Some of them feel like they've been there from the very beginning. Others came later, for example in my late forties with menopause. Adulthood, that sense of, there's so much complexity, there's so much doing, that I need to just be still and separate myself from all of the doing."*

A new role in life:

> *"I became a mom when I was 29 and at the moment I'm pregnant with my second child. So this role is dominant at the moment. It's just something that shows up as the most important in this season of life."*

A significant event:

"At school I'd always be in the bottom two or three of the class whereas when I did my MBA it was reversed. The MBA helped me to resolve a lot of self-doubt. The people there helped me realize that being kind and supportive was okay. Before that I hadn't been particularly kind to myself or to people around me because I thought it wasn't the way to succeed. It was that hard masculine self-image of I've got to be strong and I can't appear to be soft by being compassionate to myself and to others."

Or being in the presence of someone to be admired:

"I went to a workshop and the facilitator was so authentic. And I remember going, wow, I want to be like her because she just seems so real and genuine. And it stuck with me. And that's a big part of me now."

The development of a role may be a matter of personal choice, at least in part:

"My partner is very loving and not very confrontational, which helps to maintain the love and the good relationship. The older I get, the more I value this role and this part of my life. And the more I want to invest into that part."

The emergence of a self was sometimes a consequence of therapy or other forms of self-exploration. For confidentiality reasons we won't include those quotes here. These stories included the emergence of selves in an environment of domestic violence, of difficult relationships in the family home more generally, or people experiencing out-of-body experiences as parents passed away. Some stories from the therapy space specifically talked about the emergence of parts of self that had a protective function.

Conclusions

There are hundreds of multiplicity theories. We have created three categories of theory only to illustrate one or two fundamental differences between those theories. The most fundamental difference is that some of these theories take a classical scientific approach, attempting to establish an objective truth, while others are unashamedly phenomenological, believing that the individual is the expert as to how the individual functions.

We didn't interview neurologists. Most respondents were coaches, most of whom had read at least one theory on multiplicity, often a phenomenological theory, and responded with reference to their own personal beliefs. The theories they read appeared to influence their perspective without dictating it. Not everyone who cited Schwartz, for example, believes there exists a separate self alongside parts. Not everyone who cited Bachkirova likes the term mini-selves.

And so this was an exploration not of some kind of objective truth as to the nature of multiplicity, but of the stories people tell themselves as to the nature of self. In service of keeping the article concise, we explored only three theories of multiplicity. There are hundreds more, and not every phenomenological theory would align with Schwartz's work, not every neurologist would agree with Claxton, and not every philosopher would concur with Bachkirova.

These accounts are primarily phenomenological in that they are first-hand experiences as to how people experience themselves. That doesn't mean the respondents are purely phenomenological in their orientation. Some people outlined their theories of self with great confidence, others were careful to

caveat their accounts with a belief that much of what happens within is subconscious and therefore unknown. This will be true of the people we coach too. Some will be content to explore their own experiences of self, holding those evolving perspectives as truth. Others may look to you for guidance as to what objective truth exists. If your bias is toward the phenomenological for example, this may be a good reason to explore other theories, including the neurological and philosophical.

The stories we heard of self differed in many respects. Some people, for example, were content to describe three or four different selves. Others described in 19 or 20 different selves in great detail. Some people like the term 'parts' because it wasn't psychological. Some people like the term 'selves' because it is psychological. Some people believe in the existence of a self separate to their parts, others do not. Some believe in the existence of a part that organises the other parts, some don't. Some people hear lots of voices, some hear one voice, others don't hear a voice at all. Some see the value in personifying their different entities, one coach at least was horrified at such a suggestion. Different coaches emphasised different triggers for the emergence and development of their different selves/parts.

This matters because if we are to be effective as coaches, helping people to further develop their own stories as to the nature of self, we are unlikely to succeed if we are determined to advocate for just one theory. If the only theory I have read, for example, is that of Richard Schwartz (we're not picking on Schwartz here – insert any name and accompanying philosophy) and I am attached to the idea of a separate self and various parts which can be identified as exiles, managers and firefighters, and I believe we can talk directly to each of these parts, each of which can be thought of in terms of an autonomous subpersonality – then this is likely to resonate only with a subset of the people I work with. Others will reject the notion and thereby, perhaps, the whole idea of multiplicity. In the absence of an objective truth we are more likely to be effective by being curious, by creating the space for people to create their own stories. The more theories/stories we are aware of, the more helpful we become.

What specifically then, can the coach do, to become more effective in this space?

1. **Read around**. Some of the people we spoke to were familiar with one theory of multiplicity, often a phenomenological theory with its roots in psychodynamic practice. To familiarise yourself with one phenomenological theory is to familiarise yourself with one set of stories. Those stories may have made sense to you, but they won't make sense to everyone. Read around, be curious as to how different people make sense of multiplicity, not only the phenomenologists, but also the neurologists and the integrators/philosophers. As well as the works of Schwartz, Claxton, and Bachkirova, others like Rowan, Lester, Kurzban, Carter, and many others, have written accessible texts on the subject – you just have to hunt them down.

2. **Interrogate**. What direct implications do these texts have for your coaching? In most cases you may have to do some thinking and ask around. Richard Schwartz's work is popular at the moment, for example, and you can listen in to how other coaches adopt his ideas into their work. A very few texts, such as Tatiana Bachkirova's *Developmental Coaching. Working with the Self* book, are written specifically for coaches and include practical guidance.

3. **Reflect**. Which stories and theories make most sense to you. How do you think about self and how does this impact on the way that you make sense of the world around you, and the way that you coach? To what extent does the popular idea of seeking out your one, true, authentic self make sense – or not? What sense do you make of psychometric tools that seek to define your (one) personality? What sense do you make of 360 surveys, most of which assume a single self[xi]?

By going through that reflective process you are role modelling a voyage of self-exploration that some of your clients may choose to follow.

4. **Hold at arms length**. As a consequence of your reflection, you may develop a story of self that resonates strongly with you. The risk is that you now go and advocate only for your story when working with your clients. Your story is your story. Why do you think this story resonates particularly for you? To what extent can you see it as *your* story?

5. **Be curious**. Which is really an outcome of the first four actions. To what extent do you feel able to go and listen to how others make sense of the idea of multiple selves? To act as a co-curator of those stories in service of enabling your clients to become more self/selves-aware, and therefore more happy and effective as leaders?

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[i] Including (in alphabetical order) Allport, Anderson, Assagioli, Bachkirova, Beahrs, Berne, Cantor, Carter, Denzin, Fairbairn, Federn, Freud, Gallagher, Gazzaniga, Gergen, Goffman, Goldstein, Gurdjieff, Hilgard, Horowitz, James, Janov, Jung, Kihlstrom, Klein, Laing, Lake, Lewin, Mahrer, Mair, Markus, Martindale, McAdams, Minsky, Murray, O'Connor, Ogilvy, Ornstein, Perls, Redfearn, Rogers, Rossan, Schwartz, Shapiro, Stone, Strauss, Tart, Valint, Vargiu, Watkins (J), Watkins (M), Winkelman and Winnicott.

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