

How Coaches Make Sense of Multiplicity Theories

International Journal of Evidence Based
Coaching and Mentoring
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–12
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DOI: 10.1177/17418305261483908
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Abstract

The phrase ‘multiplicity of self’ refers to the idea that the human mind consists of multiple and distinct identities, sub-personalities or self-states rather than a single, fixed self. Multiplicity is becoming increasingly popular as a theory upon which to base coaching practice. Though there exist many different multiplicity theories, most coaches are familiar with only one or two theories. Multiplicity theories can be quite different in their philosophy and foundations for practice, and clients may respond more readily to some theories than others based on what makes most sense to the individual. In this study, we examined five different multiplicity theories: phenomenological, neurological and philosophical based, to illustrate some of those similarities and differences. We then spoke to 24 practising coaches to understand their coaching philosophies relative to those differences. We close by offering suggestions to those seeking to be more adaptive in their approach to working with multiplicity.

Keywords

multiplicity, coaching, phenomenological, neurological, philosophical

Introduction

Multiplicity

Multiplicity of self is the idea that the human mind consists of multiple selves, not a single, fixed self. The constituent parts of the self are variously referred to as sub-personalities, sub-personas, self-states, mini-selves, parts and other terms. The idea that the self consists of multiple parts is common in the field of psychology (Grimley, 2025) and has been around for many years. Plato, for example, wrote about the rational, appetitive and spirited parts of the psyche more than 2,500 years ago in *Republic*. Rowan (1990) provides a detailed account of the evolution of the notion of sub-personalities in the world of psychotherapy, starting with Freud (1938), who wrote of the id, ego and superego, and Jung (1936) writing about the tendency of the psyche to split itself into parts. He also highlights the work of other early psychotherapists, such as Hannah, Johnson and Mary Watkins, and refers to Vargui’s work on psychosynthesis and Moreno’s early work on psychodrama. Rowan goes on to detail the work of Fritz Perls, the inventor of Gestalt therapy, writing about the top-dog and the underdog; Berne, among others, writing about different ‘ego states’ in describing Transactional Analysis, and Shapiro’s use of ‘subselves’ in therapy. Rowan goes on to outline more recent contributions by people like John Watkins, Stone and Winkelman, Mahrer, Satir and the work of Hilgard and Beahrs in the domain of hypnotherapy, before outlining his own sub-personalities theory.

These theories are not all the same. Grimley compares his philosophy to those of Mead (1934) and James (1892), for example. James and Mead, he says, describe the development of selves as a passive process that takes place as a response to changes in the environment, whereas he suggests the process is more constructive. Rowan (1990) compares the work of Berne with the work of Vargui, who differ as to the number of ego states or sub-personalities that there are. Other authors differ as to the intent of these different aspects of self: are they always fundamentally well-intentioned or are some sub-personalities by nature ‘bad’? Rowan himself (1990) disagrees with Stone and Winkelman (1985) as to the extent to which different sub-personalities are conscious or unconscious.

Purpose and Objectives

The objective of this paper was, first to highlight some of the differences between theories of multiplicity. The author did not conduct a wide-ranging meta-review of all the very many different theories of multiplicity. The intention instead

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was to highlight just some of those differences in order to illustrate how significantly different many of these theories are. The second objective of this paper was to explore how 24 practising coaches engage with the idea of multiplicity. With reference to the differences between theories outlined in the first part of this paper, the 24 coaches were interviewed to understand their position on each of those different points of debate. The overarching purpose of the paper was to illustrate the extent to which coaches differ in their philosophy of multiplicity, and to provide guidance as to how coaches can become more flexible in working with coachees who may demonstrate an equally diverse relationship with the concept. The idea of multiplicity doesn't always make sense to people, at least initially (Lester, 2010; Rowan, 1990; Schwartz, 1995), and different theories present the notion of multiplicity in quite different ways. People are more likely to begin engaging with the concept 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 at', which may require a familiarity with a range of different theories and approaches.

To achieve these objectives, five theories of multiplicity are outlined, two of which are phenomenological, two of which are neurological and one of which is more philosophical. In comparing the five theories, seven significant areas of debate are identified. A questionnaire was then designed to explore each of these seven areas of contention, which was then used to interview 24 practising coaches. The results of this analysis are then presented, and implications for coach development are then discussed.

Literature Review

Choice of Theories

A full meta-review of all the very many different theories of multiplicity was beyond the scope of this paper. The intention instead was to highlight just a few fundamental differences in order to illustrate how significantly different many of these theories are. The phenomenological and neurological theories are chosen because the two perspectives are fundamentally different. Phenomenological theories focus on people's subjective conscious experience, focusing on how things are perceived rather than their underlying structure and causation. Neurological theories of self focus on the neurological nature of self, its structure and neurological functioning. In addition, we include a philosophical perspective, chosen partly because it is the only fully worked-through theory of multiplicity developed with coaches in mind. Bachkirova (2022) dedicates much of her book to the story of the evolving multiple self, outlining key principles of developmental coaching, her approach underpinned by a commitment to philosophical traditions of critical thinking.

Phenomenological Theories

The theories of Richard Schwartz and John Rowan are essentially phenomenological. Schwartz's theories were selected partly because his theories are much in vogue at the moment in the coaching domain. Rowan's work was chosen because his work is also widely cited in the coaching domain. These theories are psychodynamic in origin and have their roots in people's first-person experiences of self (Eakin, 1999; McAdams, 1993).

Richard Schwartz (1995, 1999). Schwartz began as a therapist, working a lot with people suffering from bulimia. His perspective is phenomenological in that he says that 'clients are the experts of their experiences'. He describes a period in his life when he refused to read other people's accounts of multiplicity for fear they might hinder him from fully engaging in the stories told to him by his clients.

Schwartz writes about a 'true' or 'core' self and accompanying parts. This true self is the seat of consciousness, which he 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 says he is open to using whatever terms work best for his clients in referring to these sub-personalities but tends to use the term 'parts' because most of his clients prefer that word. Whatever the part is called, it refers to a discrete and autonomous mental system. Schwartz groups the 'parts' into three categories: Exiles, Managers and Firefighters. The ultimate purpose of all three categories is to protect the self. Many of these different parts can speak; one patient is said to have reported hearing 'a multitude of inner voices'. They interact with each other and, potentially, directly with the therapist. The therapist's role is to usefully 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. The parts are animate, clearly visible, often with 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, (ii) it may be too identified with the self or (iii) other parts are getting in the way.

John Rowan (1990, 1993, 1999). Rowan's perspectives on multiplicity also emerge from a therapy background. He describes the use of LSD in his investigations, a process he describes as being an 'astronaut of inner space'. He writes about sub-personalities, which he defines as semi-permanent and semi-autonomous regions of the personality capable of acting as a person. These sub-personalities are not 'solid objects', but processes, fluid and dynamic. In his early

exploration of the idea of multiplicity, he gathered a group of colleagues, all of whom had done some group work on the unconscious, and invited them to report how many sub-personalities they experienced. The numbers ranged from zero to 18, with an average of 6.5. For some people, the idea of sub-personalities didn't work so well. Some embraced giving names to their sub-personalities; others didn't. Rowan lists six sources of sub-personalities:

1. The different roles people play in life
2. Ongoing internal conflict
3. Fantasy images
4. The personal unconscious
5. The cultural unconscious
6. The collective unconscious

Rowan describes a multi-stage developmental process. Initial stages involve splitting, each round of splitting triggered by trauma. Later stages are more about reconsolidation, a process facilitated by the therapist. The various sub-personalities tend to be poorly organised, a consequence of not engaging in adequate conversation. As they evolve, they engage more often and form 'communes' or 'committees', again a form of consolidation.

Neurological Theories

The theories of Guy Claxton and Robert Kurzban are neurological. Both texts were chosen because they are explicitly neurological, have previously been referred to in the coaching domain, and are relatively easy to source.

Guy Claxton (1994). 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 connect with other octopuses 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. 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 wraps together a particular package of knowledge, skills and experiences that serve a particular purpose when called upon. Different assemblies are called upon by different events in the environment, and those assemblies that are awoken inhibit other assemblies.

These assemblies interact with each other mostly outside of our consciousness. Language is important here. Our ancestors lived in small communities, says Claxton, 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, community members didn't have time to all groom each other, and new processes emerged. Language evolved 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.

We experience a unitary sense of self because in order to navigate our physical environment, we need a sense of place and 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. Thus, we are driven to experience ourselves as a unitary 'thing' although the way we think and respond is modular and fragmented. A 'self-system' 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 this vocal 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's role is to create a fiction of coherence and consistency, a role it must fulfil without having access to most of what is happening in the brain. 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. 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, with consciousness having 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.

Robert Kurzban (2010). Kurzban depicts the brain as a collection of small programming sub-routines, comparable to iPhone applications, each operating by its own logic as designed by natural selection. What people think, or what they do, depends on which app is running the show at any given moment. Because so much of what happens in our heads is subconscious, people must sometimes either confess that they don't know why they did something, or else make up a story to explain it. People are inherently hypocritical, says Kurzban, when different parts of the mind compete, pursuing different purposes in different contexts. Kurzban suggests the phrase 'cognitive dissonance' has little meaning for the modular self. If the self is modular, and if some of those modules

are unconscious, then we are likely to experience contradictory thoughts and behaviours. Self-deception is the norm, not a problem to be resolved. Through this lens, we ought to beware of hearing ourselves, or others talk about what they 'really' believe. We may be listening to a module talking about what it genuinely believes, but that doesn't mean that other parts of that person believe the same thing. Our modular design means we are inherently conflicted and inconsistent.

Like Claxton, Kurzban says there is no central command unit. He also describes the brain as modular, with different modules performing different functions. These modules are structurally dispersed and cannot be localised to discrete physical structures. Kurzban distinguishes between those parts of the brain that are conscious and those that are not. Unconscious modules are not always required to send information about what they are doing to conscious modules. The conscious modules do not therefore have access to everything that's going on in the brain. And because consciousness is a relatively new phenomenon in our evolution, as is the capacity to engage in internal dialogue, this lack of internal communication may be more the norm than the exception. Kurzban suggests that we have a strong intuition that our conscious modules are 'us', denying the role that unconscious modules play in our overall functioning. The conscious parts of us can be compared to public relations executives, deciding what to communicate to others. The self through this lens is not a thing but an explanatory fiction.

A Philosophical Theory

Finally, we summarise the work of Tatiana Bachkistrova, partly because she frames her work as essentially philosophical, and also because her work is the only theoretical text written specifically for coaches. Bachkistrova (2022) frames the self as a 'philosophical puzzle', drawing on the work of Descartes, Berkeley, Reid and others, in reviewing three different stories of self: (i) self as operator, (ii) the idea that there is no self and (iii) stories of evolving self. Like Claxton, she dismisses the notion of a central operator or 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 who is in charge of the little man who is in charge of the little man? She suggests there are three specific aspects of self:

- (i) *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.

- (ii) *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 is 'king'. The ego, as Bachkistrova 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? Bachkistrova 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.
- (iii) *A narrator.* The narrator is a mini-self whose function is to make sense of the activities of the other mini-selves. 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.

Significant Differences Between Theories

There are many differences between the five theories described, and we could identify many more differences were we to embark on a comprehensive meta-review of the entire multiplicity literature. Here, we choose just seven areas of difference between the five theories outlined.

Naming. Schwartz writes of *parts*, because he says that is the term that best resonates with clients, though he also refers to them as *sub-personalities*. They are discrete and autonomous mental systems. Rowan defines sub-personalities as semi-autonomous mental systems, capable of acting as a person. Claxton writes of *assemblies* and *mini-theories*, groups of neurons working together to achieve a particular purpose. Kurzban writes of *modules*, functioning in similar fashion to Claxton's assemblies. Bachkistrova writes of *mini-selves*, particular patterns of links between different areas of the brain.

Numbers. The phenomenologists report how many parts/selves people experience. Schwartz envisages 5–15 parts (Lester, 2010). Rowan (1990) says people report between one and 20 sub-personalities, with an average of six or seven. The neurologists and Bachkistrova envisage parts as modules, of which there are numerous, most of which function unconsciously.

Description. 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. He identifies distinct categories of parts: the exiles, managers and firefighters, all with particular roles to play. Rowan's (1993) taxonomy is longer, including categories such as protector, critic, pusher, perfectionist, centrally organising sub-personality, inner child, nurturing parent, power broker and shadow. The neurologists and Bachkirova, in contrast, are wary of attempts to personify different parts of the brain. The idea that people are made up of little people (homunculi) means we then have to explain how those homunculi function. Do they too comprise a set of little–little people (etc. ad infinitum)?

Voice. In his role as therapist, Schwartz reports being able to talk directly to his client's different selves and tells the story of one patient who claimed to hear 'a multitude of inner voices'. Rowan too talks of different selves with different voices. The neurologists and Bachkirova suggest that only some parts have evolved the capacity to speak. Bachkirova describes a particular mini-self whose role it is to narrate. Claxton describes a particular system whose role it is to make sense of the interaction between selves, a task it accomplishes while often being unaware of some of those interactions, since the majority of parts lack the capacity to communicate with each other.

Evolution. 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 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 in order to defend against a loss of self. In subsequent stages, the new 'not-OK' self becomes populated by separated sub-regions, again a defensive process triggered by trauma. Some of those sub-regions are ring-fenced and deliberately forgotten. So too, later on, are some of the sub-personalities built up during adolescence. The individual's quest to identify a true singular self may be achieved later on in life by those willing to explore some of the selves they earlier ring-fenced. This can only happen if the individual accepts they are not perfect and relaxes into being more spontaneous and vulnerable.

The neurologists see the brain as plastic, an energy system attuned to the environment, constantly in motion and, to an extent, able to adapt. Our capacity to adapt is limited, however. 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 in control, and the individual is more comfortable with ambiguity and change.

Relationship Between Parts and Self. Schwartz says we have a true self, distinct from the parts. The self is the seat of consciousness, and the role of the parts is to protect the self. Rowan says that while we may experience a 'real self', it isn't a real self – it is a realised level of consciousness. The neurologist's perspective is similar. There is no separate self, though we experience ourselves as separate, mistaking the conscious narrative voice as a singular entity.

Interaction. All five theories describe patterns of interaction between the different parts. The neurologists emphasise the ongoing nature of this interaction, with assemblies of neurons turning on and off in unison, stimulated to do so by other assemblies in a process which is self-organised – there is no privileged assembly directing affairs. Claxton talks about the system being plastic, but implies the system is largely laid down during childhood. The phenomenologists and Bachkirova envisage a system in which the nature of interaction develops over time, during which the different parts, sub-personalities or mini-selves learn to work together more effectively. Schwartz focuses on the relationships between parts and the central self, with parts initially lacking trust in the self's capacity to lead, developing that trust

only over time. The self's role, ultimately, is to step up the role of conductor.

Methodology

Questionnaire

From the above review, the following questionnaire was constructed, designed to explore respondents' perspectives on the seven areas of difference described:

1. With which theories of multiplicity are you familiar?
2. Which word is best for you in thinking about the different components of self? Why did you choose this word?
3. How many of these (insert word) do you experience?
4. How would you describe these different (insert word)?
5. Do these (insert word) speak to you?
6. How did these (insert word) evolve, and how do they continue to evolve?
7. Is there any other entity working alongside these (insert word)?
8. How do these different (insert word) interact with each other?

Sampling

Respondents were invited to participate through an article posted on LinkedIn by the primary researcher. The stated purpose of the interview was to 'explore how people make sense of multiplicity theories – exploring the different ways that people experience their multiple selves working together'. Twenty-eight people initially volunteered for the interview. Those 28 people were sent an initial survey (see below). Twenty-five people returned the survey complete, all of whom were interviewed for 30–45 min, using Zoom. Of the 25 people, 24 were practising coaches, and their data was included in the subsequent analysis. Of those 24 respondents:

- Nineteen were female, and five were male.
- Eight were from the United Kingdom, seven from Australia, two each from Canada and France, and one each from France, the United States, India, New Zealand and Portugal.
- Nineteen said they were familiar with at least one multiplicity theory.

Process

Respondents were asked two rounds of questions. In the initial paper survey, they were asked to provide initial responses to questions 2, 3 and 4 above:

- Which word is best for you in thinking about the different components of self?
- How many of these (insert word) do you experience?
- How would you describe these different (insert word)?

People were asked the rest of the questions and invited to elaborate on their answers to the first three questions asked in the interview. All the interviews were conducted by Zoom and were between 25 and 60 min long. Two researchers read each transcript, extracting notes relevant to each question. The two researchers then worked together to agree on the meaning of those answers.

Results

Theories

Schwartz's phenomenological theory of Internal Family Systems (IFS) was named by 10 participants, with some people having completed programmes on IFS. Bachkirova's Development of Self in Action (DSA) theory was named five times (Figure 1). No coach mentioned more than three different theories, and the average number of theories mentioned was 1.2.

Names

The 24 respondents chose 15 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 sub-personalities (Figure 2).

Some people used the word 'part', with direct reference to Schwartz.

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

The majority of respondents said that the word just felt more appropriate, even for 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 subpersonalities, 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.

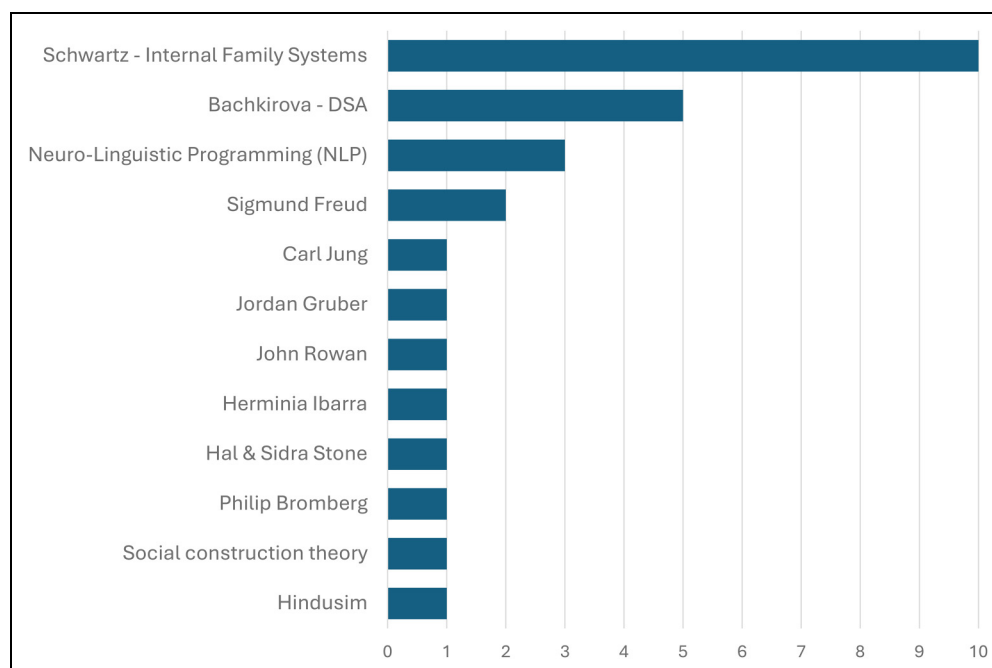


Figure 1. Multiplicity theorists referred to by participants.

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

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.

Numbers

People named between three and 20 ‘parts’, with an average of 8.2.

Description

Many people personified their internal entities. One person, for example, spoke of sub-personalities, 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 respondent 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 respondent described a part of themselves as:

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, describing them more as states of being, such as angry, concerned, outraged and so on, or in terms of their function, such as nurturing, intuitive, creative or empathetic. 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 then there’s Eileen, who’s 19. And they’ve literally named 10 different personalities, I think, Jesus Christ, what the f*** did your psychotherapist do to you?

Nineteen respondents said all of their parts sought to add value and held good intentions for the overall self. Three people said that not all their parts added value, and one person said they weren’t sure. Those three people named parts of themselves that emerged early in childhood and that need protection. One of those people related the emergence of that part of self to childhood trauma.

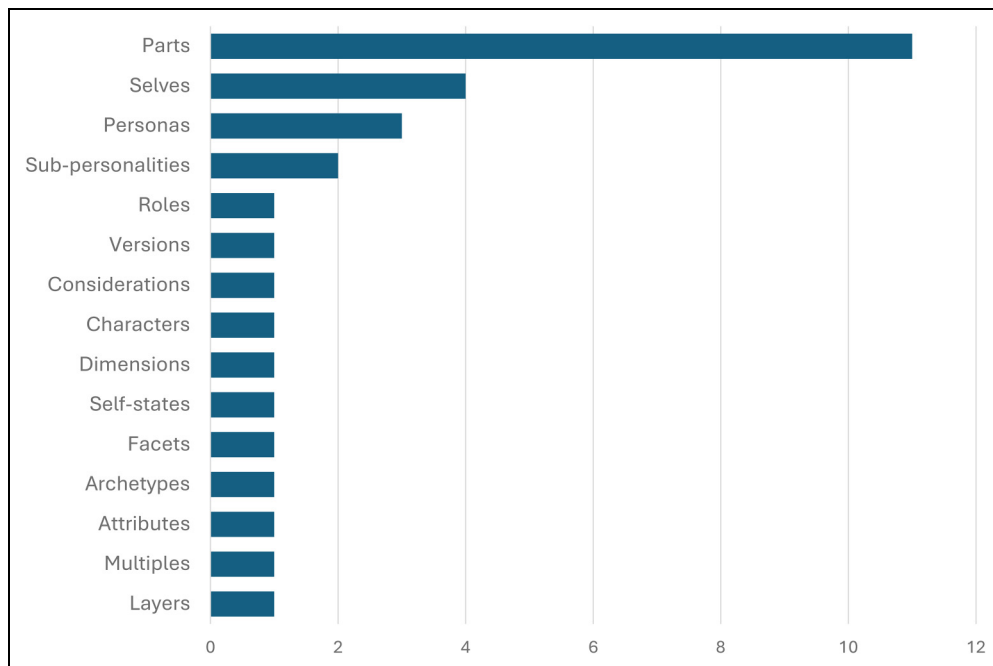


Figure 2. Names used by participants to describe their multiple entities.

Voice

Twenty-one of the respondents answered this question, of whom 14 said that at least one of their parts spoke to them. Five of those said that just one voice spoke to them; nine said they heard from multiple voices. A few respondents were unsure whether these were voices speaking, or whether the nature of communication wasn't best described using words like 'sensing'.

Evolution and Growth

People were often more comfortable talking about when they first became aware of a part rather than when it might first have appeared. For those who were more certain, some parts 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.

A new role in life:

I became a mom when I was 29 and I'm now 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.

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. 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. Stories from the therapy space were more likely to talk about the emergence of parts with a protective function.

A Separate Self

Seven of the 24 respondents said that they experience a separate self in addition to their parts. This separate self was variously named 'self', 'soul', 'essence of self', 'superego' and 'my DNA'. Eight people said there was one organising entity, which was also one of their parts, variously called the 'narrator', 'orchestrator', 'ring-master' or a specific other self named earlier in the interview. Seven people said that there was no separate self, and all of their parts functioned collaboratively.

Interaction

With regards to degrees of interaction, responses sat somewhere on a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, the different parts 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 fall back into that whole pit.

The majority of people talked about systems of interaction in which only some parts interact with other parts:

They do interact with each other, but there are a lot of polarities. [Part A] comes in and starts to figure things out. Then [Part B] comes in and says it needs to be done quickly. And with [Part C] that's three parts figuring it out and there are other parts that link up as an inner critic. [Parts D, E, and F] often work together but [Part G] 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 in a recent coaching session I did with a new client, I could see all five popping up. One self is about creating rapport and

relationship. A 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. [Self C] rarely shows up with [Self D], but I think she should. It would be nice to be able to bring them in more intentionally.

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 seen them together in a space like sitting in a circle.

It's like a Russian doll effect. It's sequential 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.

Exploring further the nature of these interactions, some respondents described an organising self, 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 suggested 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 said 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 people agreed that the process is largely subconscious *and* said they could 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. 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.

Discussion

The first objective of this paper was to highlight some of the differences between some theories of multiplicity, in particular differences between phenomenological, neurological and philosophical approaches. The second objective of this paper was to explore how 24 practising coaches engage with the idea of multiplicity with reference to those differences.

Differences Between Theories

In the literature review, we identify seven significant ways in which the five theories chosen differ. Different authors prefer different words to describe different aspects of self. The phenomenologists suggest that we can identify a finite number of selves, whereas for the neurologists numbering our selves is less meaningful given that the majority of these selves are unconscious. Schwartz and Rowan emphasised the value of personifying different aspects of self, again a notion less meaningful to the neurologists. Schwartz's and Rowan's different selves all have a voice, whereas the neurologists and Bachkirova suggest only one self, or group of selves, has the capacity to speak. The phenomenologists and Bachkirova have more to say around the ongoing evolution of selves and the way that they relate to each other; Schwartz says there is a self alongside the parts, whereas the other authors say there is no separate, orchestrating, self.

How Coaches Make Sense of Multiplicity

The average respondent was familiar with one theory of multiplicity, most often a phenomenological and/or psychodynamic theory. No one specifically referenced a neurological theory. This leaning towards the phenomenological showed up in people's responses to some of the other questions.

The majority of respondents preferred to use the word 'parts' to describe the different entities they experienced, some echoing Schwartz in saying that the word 'part' is the most accessible, regardless of the nature of those entities. When asked how many parts or selves they experienced, respondents' answers were again consistent with the phenomenologists, everyone naming a finite number of selves, all of which they were able to give a name to and describe.

The majority of respondents personified their internal entities, consistent with both Schwartz and Rowan, and somewhat inconsistent with a neurological perspective that envisages parts as assemblies of neurons, without any particular identity or self-identity. However, although many people were

familiar with Schwartz's theories, no one described their selves with reference to his taxonomy, or any other taxonomy. Some people were more reluctant to personify their different entities, including one person who vehemently objected to the idea of personification. The majority of people said that all their parts added value, a perspective consistent with neurological perspectives and some phenomenological perspectives. A minority talked about one or two selves who added no value but needed to be protected.

Consistent with the two phenomenological perspectives, 14 of the respondents said that at least one of their parts spoke to them, while others heard no voices, only a sense of what their different parts wanted to communicate. Of those 14 people, five said that just one voice spoke to them, consistent with Claxton, Kurjban and Bachkirova, and nine said they heard from multiple voices, consistent with the two phenomenologists.

Consistent with the two phenomenologists and Bachkirova, most respondents described an ongoing developmental process through which different aspects of self emerge, not only in early childhood, but often throughout adulthood. Some of this development was triggered by traumatic events, but not all.

We asked people if there is a separate self in addition to these parts. The neurological perspective suggests that there cannot be a separate self, a homunculus, for that implies the homunculus must have a homunculus, and so on ad infinitum. The two phenomenological theories take different positions. Schwartz argues that there is a separate self, and the role of the parts is to protect that self, whereas Rowan says that the experienced self is not a self, but a realised level of consciousness. About a third of respondents said they have a self separate from their parts, consistent with Schwartz's phenomenological perspective. One response was particularly aligned with Rowan's theory in that the person said she didn't experience a central self until relatively late in life. When it came to understanding how the different parts (and self if present) organise themselves, some respondents said that the self did this, or one of the parts. Others said that a self and/or part tried to perform this role but didn't always succeed. Other responses were consistent with the neurological perspectives, in saying that the process was entirely collaborative, playing out in the subconscious and any sense of control was illusory.

Conclusion

We compared just five of many multiplicity theories and found them to be quite different as to their account of what multiplicity means. The 24 coaches we spoke to also presented quite different accounts of how they believed multiplicity to function, all of those accounts being primarily phenomenological.

The contrast between phenomenological theories and neurological theories is of particular interest. 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 nature of self, 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’ and refer to scientific evidence in support of theories, for example, the work of Gazzaniga (2002), Libet et al. (1983), Northoff et al. (2006) and Turk et al. (2003).

To understand the nature of self is to understand the functioning of the brain and the nature of consciousness. We do not fully understand the functioning of the brain, nor the nature of consciousness, nor therefore the nature of self. The neurologists continue to explore the nature of self through their studies of the brain, while the phenomenologists explore the nature of self through people’s lived senses of being. While these studies continue, people will continue to make their own sense of what they hear and identify more strongly with some notions than others.

Implications for Practice

If one of the roles of coach is to help people make sense of themselves, for themselves, then both phenomenological and neurological approaches are important. The coach may choose to work by helping the coachee work out their lived sense of self and/or by introducing neurological findings as they continue to emerge.

A multiplicity philosophy is potentially helpful in enabling coaches to help their clients access a richer, more complex perspective on self than is otherwise accessible, but that potential may be lost if the coach is unable to offer a perspective on multiplicity that makes best sense to the individual client. A phenomenological approach may therefore be an important element of a coaching approach. It is important though that the coach understands there exist multiple phenomenological perspectives and doesn’t attempt to impose a single phenomenological perspective on their client. That would be quite ironic. If the only theory I have read, for example, is that of Richard Schwartz (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 sub-personality, this is likely to resonate only with a subset of the people I work with. Others will reject the notion and thereby, possibly, the whole idea of multiplicity.

In the absence of an objective truth, we are more likely to be effective by being curious, creating the space for people to create their own stories. The more theories/stories we are

aware of, the more helpful we become. Being helpful may include introducing more neurological/philosophical perspectives into the conversation.

Here are some practical things the coach might experiment with in becoming more adept at working with multiplicity theory with a wide audience of different people:

1. *Read around.* Most of the people we spoke to were familiar with only one theory of multiplicity, often a phenomenological theory with its roots in psychodynamic practice. That theory may make sense to you, but it 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, the philosophers and others besides.
2. *Interrogate.* What direct implications do these texts have for your coaching? In most cases, you may have to do some more exploring. Schwartz’s work is popular at the moment, for example, based on his experience as a family therapist. How do other coaches adopt his ideas into their work? Carter (2008), Drake (2015), Earley (2012), Fadiman and Gruber (2020), Rowan (1993) and White and Epston (1990) are all quite practical texts. Bachkirova’s (2022) *Developmental Coaching. Working with the Self* is written specifically for coaches and includes guidance for practical application.
3. *Reflect.* Which stories and theories make most sense to you? How do you think about self, and how does this impact 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? (Lawrence & Bachkirova, 2023). Embarking on such a process of reflection, based on critical thinking, you set an example for others to follow.
4. *Hold at arm’s length.* As a consequence of your reflection, you may develop a theory of self that resonates strongly with you. The risk is that you now go and advocate only for your theory when working with your clients. Why do you think this theory resonates particularly for you? To what extent can you see it as your preferred theory as distinct from the ‘truth’?
5. *Be curious.* Which is really an outcome of the first four actions. To what extent do you feel able to truly 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 happier and more effective as leaders?

Limitations of the Current Research

This research is necessarily preliminary. We didn't conduct a full meta-review of every multiplicity theory of which we are aware. We commend readers to conduct their own further studies of the literature in service of further framing their own perspectives of self, and in further building their capacity to understand others' ways of thinking. Similarly, it was beyond scope to attempt a comprehensive review of the neurological literature. There exist many neurological perspectives of the nature of self, many of which are not framed specifically with reference to multiple theories of self. A more wide-ranging review of the neurological literature would similarly enhance all of our understandings of the nature of self and implications for all of the helping professions, including coaching. There exist further insights also in the psychological literature and the philosophical literature, all of which deserve further consideration and scrutiny.

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Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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