

## **Describe and evaluate two or more theories of the self**

Burns (1980) defines the self as 'the set of attitudes a person holds towards himself'. There are two key theories of the self: the symbolic interactionism and social constructionist approaches.

Symbolic interactionism accounts for the process by which the self develops, and is largely attributed to Mead (1934), who in turn, had been influenced by earlier theorists such as those of James (1890) and Cooley (1902). According to symbolic interactionism, human behaviour is governed by the meaning of the object and therefore the meaning of the self is governed by what we understand it to mean. Thus every behaviour is seen as a symbolic interaction. The importance of social interaction comes from the meaning it holds for the individual. Interaction provides the opportunity for meanings to be learned and assimilated. As we share a common language and the same capacity for symbolic thought, it is assumed that we can take on the viewpoint of another perceiver.

James' (1890) work was important as it emphasised the idea that the self is multifaceted. This is consistent with the general idea that we change who we are depending on who we are with. Our 'self' changes depending on our social situation. James' account of the self is also supported by Goffman's (1971) work, which claims that the presentation of self in everyday life differs according to various factors, as individuals strive to maintain a public self. James's idea of a multifaceted self is a valuable contribution to self-concept theory, as he suggests different personalities are constructed in the context of every relationship one has, and therefore the self changes as a result of these relationships (Hampson, 1995).

Cooley's theory of the 'looking glass self' suggests that the self is reflected in the reactions of other people. In order to understand ourselves we need to look to others for information. This idea of using others as a reference point for a glimpse of our self-concept has been partially supported by Mead.

Mead's developmental theory of the self states that the self is actually a cognitive process which remains part of the social world. In support of Cooley, Mead also argued that the self is part of a reciprocal interaction between the individual and society. Mead states that the human is an organism with a self, which transforms the individual into a type of actor who plays a particular role in the world. A human can interact with himself – this is a reflexive process allowing an individual to draw a distinction between the concepts of 'I' and 'Me'. The individual is unable to experience the 'I' part of the self and so interacts with the 'me'.

Language forms an important part of symbolic interactionism as it acts as a means by which we represent ourselves. The fundamental process by which we develop a self-concept is through role-taking. The individual must step outside oneself, to objectify oneself in order to see ourselves from another's viewpoint. Role-taking suggests that by placing ourselves in the position of others we are capable of judging ourselves.

However, experiencing ourselves from another's viewpoint is subject to all sorts of preconceived attitudes and bias. To be able to gain an undistorted view of oneself would require tremendous effort. Is full self-knowledge ever possible, especially when trying to gauge reactions from another's viewpoint?

According to social constructionist approaches, we are selective in the information we choose to impart about ourselves. We are actively constructing a self in relation to

another person. Social constructionism emphasises that as well as being multifaceted (building on James' original concept), the self is a constantly changing entity.

According to social constructionist approaches, language is the key to understanding ourselves. The structure of our language implies certain assumptions or beliefs about human nature which are then demonstrated through our social interactions with others. The labels 'I' and 'Me' mislead us into thinking that the self is a unified structure. However, these are hypothetical concepts and do not exist objectively in the world. The idea of self is purely a framework with which we try to make sense of the world around us.

The idea of self as a multifaceted structure that is dependent on the language used to construct the self is demonstrated through cultural discourses. The experience of being a person is dependent on our representation of the self – in other words, the ways in which we talk about ourselves (discourse). As discourse varies from culture to culture, different cultures have a different interpretation of the self. Cultural differences regarding the self-concept can be illustrated using Maori culture. In this culture, a particular power is bestowed upon those with favourable status, but this power is not a stable response and varies in accordance with the person's behaviour. In Maori culture, people's social standing and success and failure are dependent on external forces rather than internal states such as personality. In this cultural environment, the origin of self is an external rather than an internal concept (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and so people would experience themselves differently from in Western cultures. Thus when looking at the notion of the self, we need to take into account the broader context in which an individual operates. The notion of the self varies from individualistic to collectivist cultures, and thus both symbolic interactionism and the social constructionist approaches are limited in that they represent a purely Western, individualistic viewpoint.