Personality and ‘the self’
– An unending theoretical debate

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Introduction

Throughout history the terms ‘personality’ and ‘self’ have been used to describe that which makes us who we are as human beings. Despite their common usage through centuries and across cultures, we don’t seem to have a clear definition of what exactly ‘personality’ or ‘self’ is and what the difference is between them if there is a difference.

David Hume once described ‘Self’ as “the elusive ‘I’ that shows an alarming tendency to disappear when we try to introspect it.” (Blackburn 1994 quoted in Bruner & Kalmar 1998, p.309)

Harré, when discussing the topic of ‘self,’ has said, “The study of no aspect of humanity is so marked by muddled thinking and confusion of thought as this one.” (Harré 1998, p.2)

Allport, in 1937, can be seen to have pioneered the start of personality psychology, as a study of the individual person. However, decades afterwards, personality psychologists are still searching to find a sufficient framework or understanding of ‘personality’ and ‘the self.’ (McAdams 1996, p.295)

In this paper, I would like to outline different theoretical views on the concept of ‘self’ and its relationship to ‘personality’ or the ‘person’ as a whole. I will start with a more empirically-based view, namely trait theory, and will focus on the Five-Factor Theory (FFT) proposed by McCrae and Costa. To understand the empirical and theoretical basis for their theory I will begin with a brief introduction to the background of FFT. Then I will present the FFT personality system and show the relationship between the ‘self-concept’ and the ‘personality’ as a whole.

I will then discuss McAdams’ contemporary framework for studying personality, which resembles trait theory in many ways but has some clear differences. I will start by distinguishing between the Jamesian ‘I’ and ‘Me’ features of personality. Then I will discuss briefly McAdams view of the ‘modern self’ and its six unique qualities. Finally I
will outline McAdams’ three levels of personality description, and again bring up the question of how personality relates to self-concept.

Following that I will compare and contrast these two theories, pointing out their similarities but also clarifying on which levels their views on personality clearly differ.

Finally, in contrast to both of these theories, I want to outline shortly the social constructionist view of the ‘self’ and its relationship to the ‘person.’ There are many different social constructionist viewpoints, but I will limit myself to Harré’s and Gergen’s theories as points of reference. To further illustrate the difference in perspective between social constructionism and the two former theories, I will end by bringing in critique of the social constructionist viewpoint by McAdams and Raggatt, as representatives for narrative theory.

**McCrae and Costa’s Five-Factor Theory (FFT)**

*Introduction to background of FFT*

McCrae and Costa’s *Five-Factor Theory (FFT)* is an attempt to make a personality theory out of the empirically derived Big Five taxonomy represented in the Five-Factor Model (FFM). (John & Srivastava 1999, p.129) The Big Five taxonomy was formed from a lexical research intended to identify a taxonomy of trait terms. The many categories of traits were finally narrowed down to five broad factors: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, which seemed to be relatively recurrent through many different tests as well as across different cultures and languages (ibid, p.104-106). Based on findings that all of the Big Five dimensions had a genetic basis, Costa & McCrae concluded that traits must be biologically determined. (ibid, p. 129) Studies have also shown that these traits are reasonably stable within each individual over time, at least over the age of 30. (McCrae & Costa 2003, p.206) McCrae and Costa could not see the point in restricting the FFM to being a lexical construct of descriptive adjectives, when there was considerable evidence pointing toward traits as stable and
biologically-determined attributes. Therefore, they created the FFT as a trait theory, which would make full use of the empirical results confirming the existence of such personality traits and, based on that, explain the structure of personality as a whole. (McCrae & Costa 1999, p.140)

**FFT Personality System**

McCrae and Costa describe the ‘personality’ as “the dynamic psychological organization that coordinates experience and action.” (ibid, p.142) To describe ‘personality’ as a whole in light of their theory they have created a model which they call the FFT personality system (see diagram below). The core components of the personality: basic tendencies, characteristic adaptations, and the self-concept, are shown in rectangles, while the elliptical components are the interfaces of personality with adjoining systems. (ibid, p.142)

**Representation of the five-factor theory personality system**

(McCrae & Costa 1999, p.142)
The main focus of FFT is on the difference between *basic tendencies*, which they consider abstract psychological potentials, and *characteristic adaptations*, their concrete manifestations. (ibid, p.143) Personality traits, represented by the Big Five, are exclusively basic tendencies. They are not behaviors or skills, but are “deeper psychological entities that can only be inferred from behavior or experience.” (ibid, p.143) Characteristic adaptations refer to habits, attitudes, roles, relationships, etc. These are influenced by external influences as well as basic tendencies, and vary therefore throughout one’s life, and across cultures, families, etc. Traits however do not. (ibid, p.144)

The *self-concept*, which I interpret as their version of ‘the self’ is actually a subcomponent of characteristic adaptations. It is the part through which we understand ourselves; our view of ‘who we are.’ Our self-concept includes our view of our own traits, which is in that way stable, as our traits do not change, but it also includes our self-definitions in terms of roles, relationships and attitudes, and can therefore change over a lifetime. (McCrae & Costa 2003, p. 214-215) Another aspect of the self-concept is the life narrative, a term they borrowed from McAdams. (ibid, p.215) This describes the way in which people organize their self-concept as a story to give it meaning and purpose. Though the life story is very often based on the *Objective Biography* (the accumulation of everything a person does and experiences (ibid, p.206)), it is done so selectively. A life story will often include key experiences or turning points which had an impact on the self-concept, and will often have a distinct tone in which the life story is told (e.g. – pessimistic, comical, etc.) This tone is often characteristic of the person’s traits, and will therefore remain constant throughout the life story. (ibid, p.215)

*‘Self-concept’ in relationship to ‘personality’*

According to McCrae and Costa, the ‘self-concept,’ is only a specific aspect of the whole personality model. In summary, the ‘personality system’ includes basic tendencies or ‘personality traits,’ which are biologically-based stabile entities, as well as characteristic adaptations, which includes our goals, attitudes, and of course our self-concept or
understanding of ourselves. The self-concept can be seen as both stable to a certain extent, but also as flexible to influence from our ever-changing behaviors, experiences, and relationships. The self-concept can also be said to be organized as a life narrative. Using empirical research as its base, FFT proposes a very concrete definition of ‘personality’ and of the ‘self-concept’ as an integrated part of the whole personality system, which gives us our own picture of who we are.

McAdams’ Contemporary Framework for Studying Persons

_Distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’_

According to McAdams, in order to form an accurate description of personality, one must first make the clear distinction between the I and Me features of personality. (McAdams 1996, p.301) These terms originate from William James’s conception of the _duplex_ self, but because he used the two pronouns ‘I’ and ‘Me’ to describe these two aspects of the ‘same’ self, it is often confusing to clearly understand the distinction. McAdams explains that the I should actually be seen as a verb, the process of “selfing” or “I-ing.” It is the process of making one’s thoughts, actions, possessions, etc. “mine.” It is also the process in which one distinguishes oneself from others, so that ‘I am I and you are the other.’ (ibid, p.302) The Me is then the product of this selfing process; “the self that selfing makes.” (ibid, p.302) It is a collection of all the self-attributes resulting from the selfing process, including one’s personality traits, beliefs, feelings, as well as one’s personal belongings (e.g. – one’s dog, spouse, etc.). Therefore one could say that the I emerges and develops over time, while the Me is created or produced. (ibid, p.302)

_The Modern Self_

In order to understand the personality, McAdams explains that scientists must first understand “what” the phenomenon is before they can explain “why” it is. Rather than discussing where these aspects of personality come from (i.e. biologically determined, socially learned, etc.), McAdams keeps his focus on the “what.” (ibid, p. 301)
He also focuses specifically on the unique qualities of the ‘modern self,’ because as he puts it, “it would appear that modernity ushered in a new quality of consciousness about the individual self.” (ibid, p.297) He explains that since the rise of modernity in the West more and more people have been experiencing problems and challenges in experiencing individual selfhood. Therefore, he outlines what he sees as six unique qualities of the modern self that are crucial in understanding modern persons.

1. The self is seen as a project that the individual “works on” and creates. The Me is a product of one’s selfing process, for which one is ultimately responsible.
2. The self is made in everyday life and requires no special authority or position to legitimate it. Legitimacy is found in the common social life of work and family.
3. The self possesses an inner depth and richness, which for many is considered an inner moral source, thus the importance of being “true to one’s self.”
4. As life expectancy increased with the developments in nutrition and medical science, the self became seen more as developing over time. Modern adults think of themselves as passing through stages in life, and the development of the self became seen, as in many humanistic views, as self-actualization or self-fulfillment.
5. The self seeks a form of coherence and continuity to make sense of the changes throughout its development. Therefore a person’s identity is largely connected to their ability to create a narrative or life story to give their life meaning.
6. The modern self seeks fulfillment in what is called ‘the pure relationship,’ a new relational ideal where two independent free people choose to share love and intimacy with each other in order to find greater fulfillment.

(ibid, p. 297-298)

Three levels of personality description

According to McAdams, there are three relatively non-overlapping levels on which modern persons can be described. McAdams sees all the personal characteristics within
these three levels as potential components of the self or Me that the I constructs. (ibid, p.301)

Level 1 consists of personality traits, like those from the Big Five, which give a general and comparative disposition of the person. (ibid, p.295) However they are far from the whole personality and provide little more than what McAdams calls “a psychology of the stranger.” (ibid, p.301)

Level 2 is comprised of what McAdams calls personal concerns and includes tasks, goals, coping strategies, values, skills and other constructs that contextualize a person’s life in time, place and role. (ibid, p.295)

Level 3 is directly derived from the need in modern society for the self to express unity and purpose. The life story is a psychosocial construct that integrates the past, present and future into a narrative which creates identity in the Me. (ibid, p.295)

Thus these three levels suggest different ways of viewing the person, revealing many possible aspects of the Me that is created through the selfing process. Is there a difference then between McAdams’ definition of ‘personality’ and of the ‘self-concept’ (the I and Me)? (ibid, p.302)

**Difference between ‘personality’ and ‘self-concept’**

According to McAdams, “any aspect of personality – trait, concern, or story – may, in principle, be part of the self-concept; the person may assume ownership of it, may make it mine through selfing.” (ibid, p.303)

However, that does not mean that personality is synonymous with the self-concept. Some aspects of the Me are not part of the personality (my belongings, spouse, etc.), while some aspects of personality are not necessarily targets of selfing, although they in principle could be. This incorporates a some what Freudian view of personality, where
there are deeper unconscious parts of the personality that selfing regards as “not-Me” or doesn’t regard at all. (ibid, p.303)

If characteristics of personality, such as traits, concerns, and stories, are possible components of the Me, then they also have an I-like quality, meaning they can potentially influence the process of selfing. This would mean that a trait such as extroversion would influence how one sees, constructs, and makes sense of the Me. However, McAdams makes clear that, “…traits, concerns, and stories are not ‘parts’ or ‘components’ of the I; instead, they are potential Me elements that, like any other Me elements, may have implications for how the I works.” (ibid, p.303)

**Comparison of the Two Theories**

In many ways we can see similarities between these two personality theories. Both mention traits, personal concerns/characteristic adaptations, and life narratives as three main aspects of personality. Both distinguish between the self-concept and the personality and see them as entities within or pertaining to the person. The greatest difference between the two theories seems to be their starting point, their goal, and the foundation upon which they base their theories.

McCrae & Costa’s starting point and goal was to create a personality theory on the basis of traits and the empirical research supporting their existence. Their personality model very concretely distinguishes between traits and characteristic adaptations, with focus on that traits are biologically determined, stable, and cannot be directly accessed or observed. (McCrae & Costa 1999, p.143) Their diagram shows that traits affect other aspects of personality, but none of the others can affect traits. (ibid, p.142) Therefore, the focus on the self-concept is also seen in the light of how the self-concept is affected by traits. (McCrae & Costa 2003, p.228-229) McCrae & Costa’s view can be summarized by the quote, “Ask not how life’s experiences change personality; ask instead how personality shapes lives and gives order, continuity, and predictability to the life course, as well as creating or accommodating change.” (ibid, p. 235)
McAdams, on the other hand, had a different goal and starting point. He saw looking back at the history of personality psychology that no one as of yet has been able to come up with “a conceptual framework capable of orienting theory and research around human individuality in cultural context.” (McAdams 1996, p.296) His goal was then to propose a framework that could unify the two broad fronts of modern personality psychology: personality traits and cognitive/social approaches. (ibid, p.300-301) It was important to him to situate the person within his/her sociohistorical setting, understanding the complexity of adult lives in modern society. (ibid, p.296)

In McAdams’ article from 1996¹ he praises the Big Five in many aspects, however he criticizes its ability to stand as an integrative framework for studying persons by saying, “it may not be comprehensive enough, for it makes the whole of personality to be synonymous with traits.” (ibid, p.296) This critique, however, I don’t feel is accurate of FFT, which bases personality strongly on traits, but does not present the whole personality to be synonymous with traits. The critique could however be outdated, as he wrote the article in 1996 naming only the Big Five, while Costa & McCrae’s article on FFT was published in 1999. Nevertheless, McAdams also mentions that he doubts “the inherent ability of any trait-based scheme, no matter how comprehensive, to account for human individuality.” (ibid, p.296) Costa & McCrae agree with this point saying, “Although it is doubtless true that every person is in some respects like no other person, FFT (like most personality theories) has nothing to say about this aspect of the person.” (McCrae & Costa 1999, p. 149) It is there it seems that the two theories collide. According to McCrae and Costa, including human individuality and sociohistorical setting is not so crucial in understanding personality. For them the focus lies in finding out which traits the person has, and researching how those traits then affect the rest of the person’s life and decisions. (ibid, p. 149) For McAdams, however, it is utterly crucial when investigating personality to keep the person in context, and see them as a contemporary individual in a modern society. (McAdams 1996, p.316)

A Social Constructionist view on ‘self’

In contrast to both McCrae & Costa’s and McAdams’ view on ‘self’ or ‘self-concept’ as a part of the personality: a person’s sense of “who I am” or what is “mine,” social constructionists argue that the self is not an entity within a person but a site, position, something “out there.” Every theorist has of course their own definition, so I have chosen to focus on Harré’s and Gergen’s view of the self.

Harré’s view on ‘self’

Harré goes about tackling the subject of ‘self’ in a totally different way than the other two theorists we have discussed so far. Harré starts by looking at the human being and asking, “What sorts of attributes are those we single out as ‘mental’?” (Harré 1998, p.3) His answer is that “mental states…are produced ad hoc in the course of people acting, and are nothing but attributes of the stream of action. There are no mental entities other than the public and private actions people engage in.” (ibid, p.3) From this he then concludes that ‘the self’ is not an entity, but is instead a place from which we view the world and out from which we act. “There are only persons. Selves are grammatical fictions, necessary characteristics of person-oriented discourses.” (ibid, p.3-4) Harré takes this stand in opposition to the Cartesian view of the ‘self,’ which claims that “there must be a substantive mind in association with the body for there to be a person at all.” (ibid, p.4) Harré wants to prove that this view is scientifically wrong, as an immaterial mind cannot bring about bodily action in a material world. It is against the principles of science. (ibid, p. 4)

So, does Harré “believe” in such thing as a ‘self’ or not? Though he claims it to be a fiction, his theory is actually largely based on what he calls Self 1, Self 2, and Self 3. He explains that these three aspects of personhood, though not real entities, are hard to dispense with as they are key to understanding our human form of life. The problem, however, is that we speak about these aspects using nouns, giving them a thing-like quality which can be very misleading. (ibid, p.4-5)
Self 1, Self 2, and Self 3

I will shortly try to explain what Harré means by these three forms of ‘self’.

- **Self 1**: “the idea of point of view from which one perceives the material environment and acts on it.” (ibid, p.5) Harré explains that having a sense of self is not an ego’s intuition of itself, but more a sense of location in space. (ibid, p.4) Self 1 can be described as a “sense of self as a singularity”; having no other attributes than a position in space and time. (ibid, p.8)

- **Self 2**: “the idea of self as the shifting totality of personal characteristics.” (ibid, p.5) This includes the person’s more stable physical make-up as well as their thoughts, actions, skills, liabilities, etc. (ibid, p.8)

- **Self 3**: “the totalities of personal impressions we make on other people.” (ibid, p.5)

What makes one a unique individual human being, according to Harré, is 1) the fact that one is a separate body, taking up a different space in time than any other and 2) one’s specific attributes or personal characteristics. So when people refer to their ‘sense of self,’ they can be referring to their individual personal make-up (Self 2) or to their specific point of view from which they perceive and act (Self 1). This lack of clarity in the meaning of the term ‘self’ can cause confusion and muddle in our understanding of the person. Therefore, Harré proposed what he calls ‘the standard model’ as a framework to explain this duality of ‘self’ and outline in general the grammar of our ways of talking as and about persons. (ibid, p.7-9)

By adding Self 3 (the way others see us) to the duality of ‘self’ we have just discussed, Harré’s ‘standard model’ features the Person as the ‘real’ existent and the three forms of Self as aspects of or conditions for the flow of personal action. (ibid, p.9)

Person {Self 1, Self 2, Self 3}
It is crucial, however, to remember that Self 1, Self 2, and Self 3, are not entities; the use of these expressions is merely a rhetorical convenience. As psychological or mental elements are mere “products” of actions, they are short-lived and are in no way sub-personal entities. (ibid, p.16)

‘I’ as a first person device

Most of Harré’s arguments are based on linguistic analysis, as he believes that the study of grammar is the key to understanding different aspects of the human experience. To understand deeper how the disparate aspects and locations of a person are unified as being one singularity, we must look closer at the role of the pronoun ‘I’ as a first person device. It is important, according to Harré, that we understand that ‘I’ is not a referring expression like for example a proper noun. Proper nouns and their equivalent refer to actual formerly or potentially embodied persons. ‘I’ however should be understood as indexical instead of referential. This means that ‘I’ is used to synthetically create a sense of self as a singularity by tying together the person’s different locations in the manifolds of things, persons, and events. (ibid, p.17) To put it in Harré’s own words, “The psycholinguistic thesis of the social construction of selfhood is simply that in acquiring the grammatical capacity to use the first person devices the singularities of self are brought into coordination as the sense I have of my own person being as a singularity, my continuous point of view.” (ibid, p.18)

In contrast to the other two theories, Harré takes ‘self’ out of the person, and denies its ‘existence’ as an entity or even as an “ego’s intuition of itself.” (ibid, p.4) There are no mental entities other than our actions, so the whole idea of ‘self’ is defined linguistically and people construct and revise their experiential selves rather than being containers of ‘self entities.’ (ibid, p. 19-20)
**Gergen’s view of ‘self’**

Harré takes ‘self’ out the person because it isn’t scientific that there can exist an insubstantial mind that brings about bodily movements in the material world. (ibid, p.4) Gergen too removes the ‘self’ from within the individual, but for quite other reasons. He starts by bringing to our attention that the paradigm that we are masters of our own actions and conscious individual selves is socially constructed and defined. “The assumption that we privately think, feel, desire, intend, and the like is not demanded by ‘what there is,’ but is essentially optional.” (Gergen 1999, p. 117) This means that there are no ultimate justifications for what we believe, so it is more important to look at how the beliefs we’ve chosen affect our cultural life. (ibid, p. 118) Gergen points out that our individualistic view has caused major problems and discontent within our Western society. In short he sees isolation, narcissism, divorce, war, utilization of others, and many other critical problems in our society as due to our individualistic view of ourselves as humans. Gergen’s proposal is to create a new conception of self that will improve social life and create a more promising future. (ibid, p. 118-122)

**The Relational Self**

Instead of focusing on the individual self that thinks, feels, and directs action, Gergen suggests that we see self as a relationship. “What we take to be knowledge of the world grows from relationship, and is embedded not within individual minds but within interpretive or communal traditions.” (ibid, p.122) Until now, research and even most theories in social psychology focus on individual functioning and see other persons as disruptions in optimal functioning of the individual. (ibid, p.123) Instead Gergen urges that social psychology should place value on the presence of others in a person’s life. He quotes Mead as saying, “There is no thinking, or indeed any sense of being a self, that is independent of social process.” (ibid, p.123) Mead explains that from the moment we are born we are adjusting to others, communicating with gestures and later with language. It is through the roles we take with others that we become conscious of ourselves. (ibid, p.124)
Gergen proposes that we need to make a total paradigm shift in the way we see the self. As of now, the individual self is seen as the essential unit, the primary reality, and relationships are then something artificial that is made and must be ‘worked on’. (ibid, p.119) Instead if the self was a relational construct, it would reduce the gap between ‘self’ and ‘other.’ This does not mean however that self is to be seen as a product of others, an effect of social surroundings. We are mutually constituting, so there is no cause and effect. (ibid, p.138)

**Discussion**

So where trait theory and McAdams’ narrative theory try to define the self as an element of the personality and something within the person, social constructionist theories tend to remove self from the person and explain it as a linguistic construct. To social constructionists the self is something that we, as people, have constructed and that, in Gergen’s opinion, needs reconstructing in order to face the problems that have come about due to our individualistic point of view. (ibid, p.117-118) Harré, on another note, warns against getting lulled into seeing the person as containing multiple sub-personal entities, instead of a person who constructs, revises, and is therefore narrator of his own ‘selves,’ which in truth are just ephemeral constructs. (Harré 1998, p.18)

**McAdams’ critique of the social constructionist view**

McAdams suggests that these social constructionist views can be connected with what some scholars call a recent cultural shift toward *postmodernism*. The term postmodern can be used to describe trends in numerous different areas from art to human consciousness, but they have in common a skeptical attitude toward grand theories and universal claims, including those about science, technology and religion. (McAdams 1996, p. 298) McAdams questions whether these postmodern theories aren’t a bit too extreme? All the beliefs and assumptions of modernity are undermined leaving behind
what he calls “a confusing multiplicity of power discourses and language games that now constitute postmodern life.” (ibid, p. 298)

McAdams cannot agree with Harré’s view that “persons are creatures whose very identities are constituted by…their momentary positions in discourse.” (ibid, p. 298) In this view the self-narrations that provide coherence for lives are not really ‘inside’ the person, but are constructed and revised by the person. “The self is as much ‘out there’ in the swirl and confusion of the postmodern world, as it is ‘in the mind’ of ‘the person.’” (ibid, p.298) This seems like a bit of an exaggeration to McAdams, who wonders how contemporary people could actually go around seeing themselves as “mere locations in time and space rather than embodied actors with internalized intensions and plans.” (ibid, p.299)

Raggatt has a similar critique of social constructionism, saying that they seek to ‘deconstruct’ the self as a locus of agency. “What remains, in this view, is a socially constituted narrative of relationship, the locus of which is not centred in individuals, but rather is constituted by language, and lies ‘out there’, at the boundaries or linkages between individuals and the enveloping culture.” (Raggatt 2002, p.124) In Raggatt’s opinion this puts ‘personality’ in danger of being theorized out of existence. (ibid, p.124)

**Conclusion**

These are only very few of the numerous different personality psychology theories, all with their own view on the definition of ‘self’ and its relationship to personality and the person. But even within these few theories we can see so many conflicting ideas and opinions.

How can we start to narrow in on which theory is closer to the truth? Each theory has elements of truth seen from their starting point and point of view. Trait theorists have found empirical proof for the existence of traits, and even have results showing that genetics plays a large role in behavior, while environmental factors play little or no role.
(McCrae & Costa 1999, p.144) But does this necessarily mean that traits or the self-concept are then entities within the person? Harré also has a point when he scientifically tries to disprove the possibility of the existence of an immaterial self that brings about bodily movements in a material world. (Harré 1998, p.4) Could it be that genetic influences can affect our actions and behavior without there being such an entity as the personality, self or traits within the person? Could ‘self’ really just be a linguistic or social construct? Could our ‘sense of self’ be merely a sense of location and attributes within a stream of action? Or does this bring us out on an extreme tangent where we lose sight of what it really is that makes us human? And can we, as Gergen suggests, reconstruct our concept of the individual self, which privately thinks, desires, feels and experiences, and instead see ‘self’ as a relational construct? Moreover, if we could, would this really change the problems we see in our modern world?

This pondering leads us to even a further question – “Will we ever know?” Is it actually possible for us as humans to understand fully the core of what makes us who we are? Or as Hume said, will ‘self’ continue to elusively evaporate every time we get close to it? Just as we cannot analyze language without using language, can we objectively study ‘the self’ or ‘consciousness’ without being affected by our own humanness?

This is personality psychology’s quest. When we look back in history, great improvements in knowledge and understanding have already been reached. Will we one day finally understand this elusive term ‘self’ and open a whole new door to the possibilities of psychology as a science?
References


