



# Configurations of Self

## Definition and Origin

This term was originally coined by Mearns (1999: 126) to describe ‘a number of elements which form a coherent pattern generally reflective of a dimension of existence within the Self’. The theory is also sometimes known as **‘the dialogical self’**.

While the concept of [configurations of self](#) is a development in the person-centred approach, it has similarities with concepts from other modalities: ‘This development of the self theory of PCP [person-centred psychology] has conceptual similarities with object relations theory, to “sub-personalities” ... and to ego state theory of transactional analysis’ (Tudor and Merry, 2006: 128).

## History of the Self in Person-Centred Theory

While [Carl Rogers](#) saw the self-concept as a single configuration of perceptions – ‘The self-structure is an organized configuration of perceptions of the self which are admissible to awareness’ (Rogers, 1951: 501, emphasis added) – Cooper (1999: 58) suggested that ‘the individual may have the possibility of accessing – and switching between – a plurality of qualitatively distinct self-concepts’.

Mearns and Thorne (2000: 102) developed this idea, suggesting that each person has multiple configurations of self, made up of ‘elements which form a coherent pattern generally reflective of a dimension of existence within the Self’.

## Configurations of Self in Counselling

The idea behind configurations of self is that we develop various alternative personalities that appear in certain circumstances. Each configuration has its own desires, needs, style and view of the world.

During the course of a normal day, we may draw on various configurations of self. Tolan (2003: 74) writes: “They might be named by a client as “the strong, coping me” or “my scared little girl part”, or even given a name as in “Bully Brian” or “Whining Mary”.’

Many writers have referred to Rogers’ idea of conditional positive regard: that a client may limit their own self-acceptance because of fear, shame, regret, embarrassment, anger, or a sense of loss about themselves or others.

These negative emotions, or constructs, are sometimes referred to as ‘not-for-growth configurations’. In other words, the negative side of the personality – the emotional inner voices that bring psychological pain – may hamper both happiness and self-understanding.

By exploring and examining these not-for-growth configurations in a safe, nonthreatening and non-judgemental environment, the client can process their feelings, thoughts and behaviours – and so begin the process of checking the reality and impact on their lives.

**It is not our job as person-centred counsellors to analyse the client’s configurations of self; rather, we can support the client by offering the [core conditions](#) as they choose to explore parts of themselves of which they may feel ashamed.**

A not-for-growth configuration can act as a massive ball-and-chain, dragging the client down in their life; counselling can support them to look at this and set themselves free.

### Example

Haugh (2012: 22) describes a client, Angela, who was experiencing very bad dreams about a Caesarean section. While other people expected her to ‘look on the bright side’ in that the birth resulted in a healthy baby, Angela herself was troubled by the loss of a natural delivery.

Haugh writes: ‘Angela ... had an internal critic, Mrs Cynic ... She would sometimes speak of Mrs Cynic being present at a session. “Mrs Cynic thinks I’m making mountains out of molehills – life isn’t actually that bad.”’

Haugh (2012: 22–23) goes on to describe how, as the therapeutic relationship developed, ‘this configuration started to lose its power over her’: Angela ‘began to notice that in another part of her thought she was a very hurt and vulnerable person ... Through counselling Angela came to accept both parts of her.’ Over time, the frequency of her dreams reduced significantly.

## References

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