



GSOC.SA4 Interactionism and the Social Construction of the Self

AQA 8192 · Calculators not allowed · about 75 minutes

Total Marks

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Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Answer ALL questions. Where a question refers to Item F, use both the Item and your own knowledge of interactionist ideas in your answer.

Item F: Deniz starts a new college

A hypothetical scenario written for this exercise, for students to apply interactionist ideas to.

Deniz has just started at a new sixth-form college where nobody knows him. In lessons he is quiet and formal, careful to use polite language and appear organised in front of teachers and unfamiliar classmates. At lunch, once he is with the small group of friends he has started to make, his manner changes completely: he jokes, uses slang and drops the careful, formal manner he shows in lessons.

1 Interactionist sociologists focus mainly on which level of social life?

- ☐ A) Small-scale, face-to-face interaction between individuals
- ☐ B) The economic structure of whole societies
- ☐ C) The legal system of a whole country
- ☐ D) Global patterns of trade between nations

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 George Herbert Mead argued that a sense of self develops through a specific process.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 Mead also distinguished between two parts of the self, which he called the 'I' and the 'me'.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Charles Cooley's idea of the 'looking-glass self' offers a related but distinct explanation of how the self develops.

(a) Explain what Cooley meant by the 'looking-glass self'. (2)

(b) Give an example that illustrates the looking-glass self. (2)

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 The sociologist Erving Goffman offered a different way of thinking about the self, sometimes called the 'dramaturgical approach'.

(Total for Question 5 is 6 marks)

- 6** Look again at Item F. Deniz is quiet, formal and careful with unfamiliar teachers and classmates in lessons.

Using Item F and Goffman's dramaturgical approach, explain Deniz's behaviour in lessons.

(Total for Question 6 is 4 marks)

- 7** Look again at Item F. Once with his small group of friends at lunch, Deniz jokes, uses slang and drops the formal manner he shows in lessons.

Using Item F and Goffman's dramaturgical approach, explain the change in Deniz's behaviour at lunch.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

- 8** State one criticism that is often made of Goffman's dramaturgical approach.

(Total for Question 8 is 2 marks)

- 9** State one criticism that is often made of interactionism as a whole perspective.

(Total for Question 9 is 2 marks)

- 10** Mead, Cooley and Goffman all offer explanations of how the self develops through interaction with others, but their explanations are not identical.

Evaluate the view that a person's sense of self is mainly shaped by how they interact with other people, rather than by fixed personal traits. In your answer you should refer to more than one interactionist thinker.

(Total for Question 10 is 12 marks)

- 11** For each description below, state whether it best matches Mead's, Cooley's or Goffman's ideas.

(a) A person imagines how they appear from another person's point of view, especially significant individuals in early play. (1)

(b) A person's self-image is shaped by imagining how others judge them. (1)

(c) A person behaves formally in front of an audience but relaxes once away from it. (1)

(Total for Question 11 is 3 marks)

- 12** Explain one way Mead's concept of the 'generalised other' helps explain why people can behave appropriately even among strangers.

(Total for Question 12 is 2 marks)

- 13** Explain two reasons Goffman's 'back stage' setting might feel more comfortable than a 'front stage' setting.

(Total for Question 13 is 4 marks)

- 14** Sociologists sometimes ask whether people have one true, fixed self, or many different selves shown in different situations.

(Total for Question 14 is 2 marks)

Mark scheme · GSOC.SA4 Interactionism and the Social Construction of the Self

Question 1

- **B1** A (small-scale, face-to-face interaction)
- **Answer: A**

Question 2

- **B1** identifies 'role-taking' (or 'taking the role of the other') as the process by which a child imagines how they appear from another person's point of view
- **B1** development, e.g. Mead argued children first take on the roles of significant individuals, such as a parent, in play
- **B1** identifies the 'generalised other' as the shared attitudes and expectations of society as a whole, which a person eventually learns to imagine and respond to
- **B1** development, e.g. once a person can respond to the generalised other, they can act appropriately even in situations involving people they have never met
- **Answer: Mead argued a sense of self develops through 'role-taking', imagining how one appears to others, beginning with significant individuals in play; a person eventually learns to imagine the 'generalised other', the shared expectations of society as a whole, allowing them to act appropriately even among strangers.**

Question 3

- **B1** identifies the 'me' as the socialised part of the self, made up of the attitudes and expectations of others that a person has internalised
- **B1** development, e.g. the 'me' is what allows a person to act in ways that fit with social expectations
- **B1** identifies the 'I' as the spontaneous, creative, individual part of the self that responds to the 'me' but is not fully determined by it
- **B1** development, e.g. the interaction between the 'I' and the 'me' explains how individuals can be both shaped by society and capable of original, unpredictable action
- **Answer: Mead's 'me' is the socialised part of the self made up of internalised social expectations, while the 'I' is the spontaneous, creative part that responds to the 'me' without being fully determined by it; together they explain how a person can be both shaped by society and capable of original action.**

Question 4

- (a) **B1** identifies that people develop their self-image by imagining how others see and judge them (oe)
- (a) **B1** development, e.g. this imagined judgement then shapes how a person feels about themselves and how they behave
- (a) **Answer: Cooley's looking-glass self is the idea that people develop their self-image by imagining how others see and judge them; this imagined judgement then shapes how they feel about themselves and how they behave.**
- (b) **B1** a plausible example where a person's self-image changes based on an imagined or perceived judgement from others
- (b) **B1** a brief, correct explanation linking the example to the concept, e.g. explaining that the person comes to see themselves as others appear to see them
- (b) **Answer: A student who is repeatedly praised by teachers for being helpful may come to see themselves as 'a helpful person', because that is the image reflected back by others' reactions.**

Question 5

- **B1** identifies that Goffman compared everyday social life to a theatrical performance, in which individuals present a version of themselves to an audience
- **B1** explains the term 'impression management': the ways people consciously or unconsciously control how they appear to others
- **B1** distinguishes 'front stage', where a person performs a role for an audience and behaves according to social expectations
- **B1** from 'back stage', where a person can drop the performance and behave more informally, away from that audience
- **B1** development, e.g. Goffman argued people often present different versions of themselves in different settings, rather than having one single, fixed self
- **B1** correct source attribution, e.g. reference to Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959)
- **Answer: Goffman compared social life to a theatrical performance: individuals manage the impression they give ('impression management'), behaving formally 'front stage' for an audience and more informally 'back stage' once away from it, presenting different versions of themselves in different settings rather than one fixed self (The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1959).**

Question 6

- **B1** correctly identifies Deniz's lesson behaviour as a 'front stage' performance
- **B1** applies this to Item F, e.g. Deniz is careful and formal because he is performing in front of an audience (teachers and unfamiliar classmates) whose judgement matters to him
- **B1** development, e.g. this reflects impression management: Deniz is controlling how he appears to fit social expectations of a new student
- **B1** clear, accurate use of Goffman's terminology (front stage, impression management, audience)
- **Answer: Deniz's careful, formal manner in lessons is a 'front stage' performance: he is managing the impression he gives to an audience of teachers and unfamiliar classmates whose judgement matters to him as a new student.**

Question 7

- **B1** correctly identifies Deniz's lunch behaviour with friends as a 'back stage' setting
- **B1** applies this to Item F, e.g. once away from the wider audience of teachers and unfamiliar classmates, Deniz can drop the formal performance
- **B1** development, e.g. this shows Goffman's point that the same individual presents different versions of themselves in different settings, rather than one single, fixed self
- **B1** clear, accurate use of Goffman's terminology (back stage, performance)
- **Answer: Deniz's relaxed, joking manner with friends at lunch is 'back stage' behaviour: away from the wider audience of teachers and unfamiliar classmates, he can drop the formal front-stage performance, showing how the same person presents different versions of themselves in different settings.**

Question 8

- **B1** identifies a genuine criticism, e.g. critics argue that describing all social behaviour as 'performance' can make people seem insincere or calculating, when much everyday behaviour may feel natural and unplanned rather than deliberately managed
- **B1** brief development, e.g. or that the approach focuses heavily on individual interaction and gives less attention to wider social structures such as class or power
- **Answer: Critics argue that describing all social behaviour as 'performance' can make people seem insincere or calculating, when much everyday behaviour may feel natural rather than deliberately managed, and that the approach gives less attention to wider social structures such as class or power.**

Question 9

- **B1** identifies a genuine criticism, e.g. critics argue interactionism's focus on small-scale interaction can neglect the influence of wider social structures, such as class, patriarchy or the economic system
- **B1** brief development, e.g. so interactionism may struggle to explain large-scale patterns of inequality on its own
- **Answer: Critics argue interactionism's focus on small-scale interaction can neglect the influence of wider social structures, such as class or patriarchy, so it may struggle to explain large-scale patterns of inequality on its own.**

Question 10

- **Level 4** (10-12): A detailed, well-balanced evaluation that accurately explains at least two interactionist accounts (Mead, Cooley and/or Goffman) of how the self is shaped through interaction, supported by accurate reference to named sociologists. Strengths and weaknesses of the interactionist view are analysed, and a reasoned, supported judgement is reached. Sociological terminology is used accurately and consistently throughout.
- **Level 3** (7-9): A clear evaluation that explains at least two interactionist accounts, with some accurate reference to named sociologists. Some analysis of strengths/weaknesses. An attempt at a conclusion, which may be only partly supported.
- **Level 2** (4-6): Some relevant explanation of one or more interactionist accounts, with limited development or accuracy. Little clear evaluation.
- **Level 1** (1-3): One or two isolated, undeveloped points about the self or interaction, with little or no sociological terminology or accurate detail.
- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **Indicative content:**
 - Mead's case: the self develops through role-taking and eventually responding to the 'generalised other', with the 'I' and 'me' explaining both social conformity and individual creativity.
 - Cooley's case: the looking-glass self shows how self-image forms from imagining others' judgements, so the self is a reflection built through interaction rather than something fixed from birth.
 - Goffman's case: the dramaturgical approach shows the self is presented differently in different settings (front stage/back stage), such as Deniz's contrasting lesson and lunchtime behaviour in Item F, suggesting there may be no single, fixed self at all.
 - Evaluation for the interactionist view: these accounts fit everyday observation that people behave differently in different social contexts, and give a detailed, close-up account of how identity is actively built rather than simply given.
 - Evaluation against the interactionist view: critics argue these accounts focus on individual interaction and can neglect wider structural forces (class, patriarchy, ethnicity) that also shape identity, which functionalist, Marxist and feminist perspectives emphasise instead.
 - Further evaluation: critics of Goffman specifically argue treating all behaviour as 'performance' may overstate how calculated everyday behaviour really is; some interaction may reflect a more stable underlying self than the dramaturgical model implies.
 - A balanced conclusion might argue that interaction clearly shapes how the self is expressed and experienced day-to-day, while acknowledging that wider social structures may still set the deeper limits within which that interaction takes place.
 - A convincing top-level answer compares at least two named thinkers directly, rather than describing each in isolation, and uses a specific example (such as Item F) to illustrate the argument.

Question 11

- (a) **B1** mead
- (a) **Answer: Mead**
- (b) **B1** cooley
- (b) **Answer: Cooley**
- (c) **B1** goffman
- (c) **Answer: Goffman**

Question 12

- **B1** identifies that the generalised other represents shared social expectations that a person has internalised, not just the expectations of specific known individuals
- **B1** development, e.g. this means a person can predict how a stranger might expect them to behave, and act accordingly, without needing a personal relationship with that stranger
- **Answer: Because the generalised other represents shared, internalised social expectations rather than only the expectations of specific known people, a person can predict how a stranger might expect them to behave and act accordingly.**

Question 13

- **B1** one reason, e.g. back stage there is no wider audience whose judgement needs managing
- **B1** development of that reason, e.g. so a person does not need to keep up continuous impression management
- **B1** a second, different reason, e.g. back stage settings often involve people, such as close friends, who already know and accept the person
- **B1** development of that reason, e.g. so there is less risk that relaxed or informal behaviour will damage how the person is seen
- **Answer: Back stage can feel more comfortable because there is no wider audience to manage an impression for, and because it usually involves people, such as close friends, who already know and accept the person, so relaxed behaviour carries less risk to how they are seen.**

Question 14

- **B1** identifies that Goffman's approach suggests people present different versions of themselves in different settings, rather than having one single fixed self
- **B1** development, e.g. Mead's and Cooley's approaches, in contrast, describe a self that develops through interaction but is still experienced as a single, continuous identity by the individual
- **Answer: Goffman's approach suggests people present different versions of themselves in different settings, while Mead's and Cooley's approaches describe a self that develops through interaction but is still experienced as a single, continuous identity.**