

The Concept of Self

Unit 3 Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Unit introduction	1
Learning outcomes for this unit	1
Definition of self	1
Maslow's hierarchy of needs	3
Measuring 'self'	4
The mature personality	6
Unit summary	7
References	7

Principles and Practice of Youth in Development Work

Unit 3 : The Concept of Self

Introduction

Before you begin to read this unit, try writing an essay on 'Myself'. What would you say about yourself? Let me assure you that it would not be as easy as it sounds. It would be as difficult as describing another person accurately.

We saw that the explanations of the concept of personality differed in the selected theories we looked at in session 1. The concept of 'self' also has no universally accepted definition. However the importance of comparing 'self' with others stands out as a significant criterion in its definition. It would be useful therefore to look at its development historically. This would give us a better opportunity to comprehend what it means. In this session, we will look at a few selected theories on 'self' to make you aware of the historical development of the idea of 'self'. They will also help you to understand and what is meant by the term 'self', how to describe or measure it and use such information to improve your own personality.

Learning outcomes for this unit

After completing this session, you will be able to

- Explain the concept of 'self'
- Discuss some of the theories on the concept of 'self'
- Measure 'self' with a view to improve one's personality
- Orient yourself to the concept of 'self'
- Appreciate the importance of personality and self improvement

Definitions of 'Self'

The self is defined variously by different thinkers. Following are certain samples :

William James (1890)

The self-concept develops from **social comparisons**. We compare ourselves with 'significant others' and develop an idea of what we are like.

Cooley(1902)

The self concept is like a *looking glass*, reflecting what we believe other people think of us. Two dimensions are involved. **First dimension** being what we believe to be the judgement others make about us. The second is what we believe they see when they look at us.

Mead(1934)

The self concept forms directly through *social experiences*. This would mean reactions of other individuals as well as social norms, personal values and cultural patterns. Mead also thinks of the self as separated into subject and object. What 'I' (subject) knows about 'me' (object). The 'I' is pure awareness, and the 'me' are the things that I am aware of myself. The picture 'I' has of 'me' includes what I know about my personality, the memories, perceptions of my body, physical sensations and other things that 'I' like or care about.

Goffman(1959)

Self-concept according to Goffman, reflect the totality of different *social roles* played by the individual. We sometimes tend to act out a role to suit a particular circumstance. With time these roles get internalized and become part of an individual's self concept.

Jourad(1963)

The self-concept comprises all the *beliefs* the individual holds concerning what kind of person he/she is.

Rogers(1977)

Carl Roger's theory introduces three key terms namely, the *organism*, the *self*, and *congruence*. The organism is the total person. This includes all our needs such as food, shelter and social interactions, our emotions, feelings sensations etc. The most important of these according to him is *positive regard*, which means acceptance and approval. (refer to unit 1).

If these needs are adequately met, the individual develops a self which is in congruence with the organism. This means that the self is convinced that the organism is worthy of regard. The two are in harmony. It leads to the development of a healthy psychology of a person.

If the needs are not met adequately, the self that develops is out of congruence with the organism. The self believes that the organism is not worthy of regard. This would prompt psychological ill health. It may lead to inner conflict, self rejection and alienation.

As children, it becomes important to learn that needs of their organism may conflict with those of another. So one must learn to compromise.

Rogers added another concept to this model called **ideal self**. This is the picture of what kind of person one wants to be. It is an aspiration and a dream. If there is congruence between the self and the ideal self, then there is the development of a balanced and integrated person. If they are out of congruence, i.e. if there is a big gap between the two, it may lead to psychological imbalance.



Activity

List the key words that you had come across in definitions of the concept of self.

Maslow's Needs Hierarchy

Maslow(1970), has suggested that people share the same basic **physiological needs** and **human drives**. He explained these by building a hierarchy. This was done by placing the needs and drives on a pyramid like scale with the basic drives at the bottom. Achievement of the basic drives could lead to self actualisation which sits at the apex of the pyramid as shown in the Figure 3.1 below.

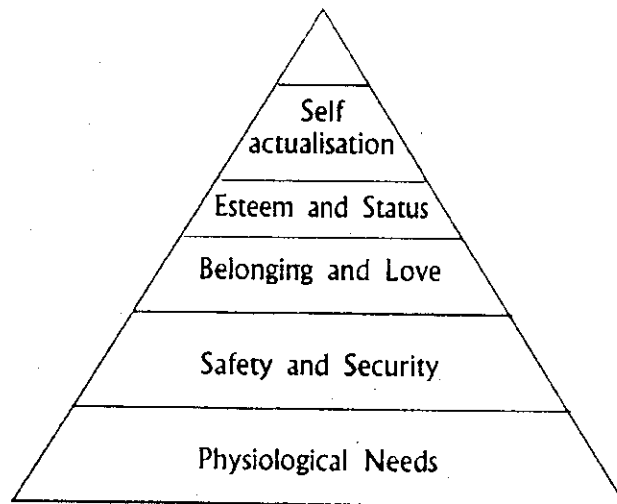


Figure 3.1 Maslow's Needs Hierarchy

We will have opportunity to come back to Maslow's concept of self-actualization and to discuss that in detail at a later stage.

Measuring Self

There are many methods which have been proposed to measure self. What they try to do is to elucidate a clear picture of how an individual thinks of himself. We shall study two such methods in order to understand the basis of such measurements.

The semantic differential

The method is due to Osgood et al., (1957). It takes two opposite adjectives such as 'good' and 'bad' and allows five (or seven) positions in between them as shown below. One can assess where one should position oneself between the two adjectives.

Good	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Bad
Nice	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Nasty
Weak	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Strong
Popular	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unpopular

Figure 3.1 An example of semantic differential

One could tick the appropriate position and indicate where in one's opinion he/she positions himself/herself between the two adjectives.

The same set of adjectives are then given to a close friend of the individual to repeat the exercise on behalf of the individual. Any discrepancy between the scores would indicate that the individual's self image is unrealistic. The information may be useful to the individual to adjust himself/herself in relation to others.



Activity

Group work recommended. Select a facilitator for the group. After discussion, make a list of 20 or 30 opposite adjectives to construct a semantic differential.

Divide the group into sub groups of two and carry out the exercise of filling the semantic differential one for oneself and another for the member of the sub group. Put for display the results for each sub group. This would give two semantic differentials to each member. The group can then discuss ways and means of adjustments needed to reduce discrepancies between the two differentials for each member.

Repertory Grid

It has been devised by Kelly (1955). The method tries to establish similarities and dissimilarities which an individual sees between himself and others he/she considers as important in his/her life. We begin by

asking who the important people are in his/her life. Then we go through the following steps in developing the grid. Let us take the case of a young boy we shall call 'A'.

1. We ask 'A' to name the people he considers to be important in his life. Let us assume that 'A' has named his 'mother', 'father', 'grandfather', 'brother', friend 'Joe' and friend 'Sheila'.
2. Then prepare a card for each person and put them together into a pile.
3. Shuffle the cards and draw any three at random. 'A' is then asked to read the names to whom the cards belong and to tell how one differs from the others. Let us assume that he has drawn 'father', 'Joe' and 'Sheila'. 'A' may say that his father is braver than 'Joe' or 'Sheila'.
4. Now we go through the rest of the cards and compare whether each is 'brave or not'.
5. Return the first three cards to the pack and reshuffle. Draw three more cards. Once again we ask 'A' to tell to whom the cards belong and how one differs from the other two. Let us assume that he says one is more fun to be with than the other two.
6. Now go through the rest of the cards and compare whether each is 'Fun or not'.
7. We repeat the process until 'A' has exhausted all possible combinations of any three people at one time. We can then set out the results in a grid as seen below. Remember that these would be more traits in the grid than what is indicated.

	Control	Brave	Fun	Truthful	Unfair	Good	Loving
Mother		O	O	O	X	X	X
Father	X		O	O	X	X	X
Grandfather	O	X		O	X	O	X
Brother	X	X		X	X	O	O
Joe	O	X	X		X	X	O
Sheila	O	X	X	X		X	X
Myself	O	X	X	X	X	O	O

Figure 3.2 Example of Repertory Grid

X represent 'yes' and *O* represent 'no.' 'A' here seems to view his adults as untruthful and only his peers as truthful although he himself is viewed unfavourably. His brother is not viewed favourably at all. Such findings could help in understanding behaviour of people and sometimes it can help people to adjust their personalities.



Activity

Group work of 5-10 participants recommended. Carry out an exercise of Repertory grid as explained above. Discuss results for each member.

The Mature Personality

As an infant, the child begins to develop awareness of 'me' and 'not-me'. He is able to distinguish his body from the remainder of the visible environment. This process of awareness then extends to mother-father, other siblings, or other love givers as sources of pleasure and comfort or displeasure and pain. These experiences lead to a demarcation of two self images, namely, a *physical self* and *psychological self*. The 'physical self' centres on the body and its limits and sensations. The 'psychological self' centres around childhood experiences of love, rejection, acceptance, feelings and learnt responses.

If you recall the theories you learnt about personality, you would be able to draw parallels between factors that affect personality and those that affect development of self.

As the child grows older, these two self images fuse together to give a perception of a **unified personality**.

Allport (1961) has suggested that people move through different stages of personality development towards maturity. Here, maturity means the achievement of consistent behaviour. Allport saw contrasting personality traits in children which they use inconsistently when reacting to either situations or other people. Examples may be traits like friendliness or honesty. A child may be honest with a friend but not with a teacher. A child may behave in a consistent manner at school (self at school) but exhibit a completely contrasting behaviour at home (self at home). In later life these different selves will merge to form a single personality which is considered to be the mature self. According to Allport, people with mature personalities exhibit the following characteristics:

- Ability to identify with other people's concerns
- Warm unselfish relationship with others
- Emotional security
- Realistic knowledge of oneself
- Sound judgement
- Consistent view of the purpose and meaning of life

Some of these characteristics may emerge to different degrees at different times in one's life. Sometimes children may develop these to a higher degree than some adults. Realistic knowledge of oneself which might be called the '**self identity**' usually emerges with adolescence and thereafter. Adolescence also brings about much experimentation in behaviour. Often the adolescent will adopt 'role models' such as close friends, films stars, singers, sportsmen, sportswomen as well as teachers. Peer group influence may become very important at this time of life. Realization that sexual attraction is important, may also lead to behavioural changes.

When such behaviour or their inconsistencies are not understood and tolerated, the adolescent may feel that he is not accepted. This may lead to feelings of insecurity and the inability to develop a consistent self. The adolescent will then be unable to develop rewarding relationships with others or to make personal adjustments necessary in developing such relationships.

Anti-social behaviour may become one avenue of letting out frustrations which result. It is therefore critical that special care and support is given to adolescents to guide them to reach mature personalities.

Techniques you studied earlier such as the semantic differential and repertory grid may become useful to understand why children may become alienated from their social environment.

Unit Summary

In this unit you would have learnt to explore the concept of 'self'. The definition of 'self' as provided by different thinkers is presented. The concept the people share certain common physiological needs and human drives is looked through Maslow's triangle of 'needs hierarchy'. The various scales used to measure 'self' are listed. The unit ends with a brief discussion on mature and unified personality.

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