Chapter 2: Self and Personality

Review Questions — Review Questions

Q1 What is self ? How does the Indian notion of self differ from the Western notion?

Self is the totality of an individual's conscious experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings about herself or himself. It defines one's existence at both the personal level (name, qualities, capabilities, beliefs) and the social level (membership of a religious, caste or regional group). It is both a subject, the knower and actor, and an object, the thing that is known. In the Western view the boundary between self and other is relatively fixed, with clear dichotomies between self and other, man and nature, subjective and objective; self and group are separate entities, so many Western cultures are individualistic. In the Indian view the boundary shifts: at one moment the self expands to fuse with the cosmos or include others, and at the next it withdraws to focus on personal needs and goals. The self is not separated from one's group; both coexist harmoniously, so many Asian cultures are collectivistic.

Q2 What is meant by delay of gratification? Why is it considered important for adult development?

Delay of gratification means deferring the satisfaction of a need or desire instead of seeking it immediately. The chapter calls learning to delay or defer gratification of needs self-control, and links it to will power, the ability to resist situational pressures and control oneself. It is important because self-control plays a key role in fulfilling long-term goals; an adult who can put off immediate pleasures can work steadily towards distant aims. It is part of self-regulation, the ability to organise and monitor one's own behaviour. Indian tradition offers mechanisms for developing it, such as fasting in vrata or roza and non-attachment with worldly things. Psychological techniques that support it include self-observation, self-instruction and self-reinforcement (rewarding oneself after a goal is met).

Q3 How do you define personality? What are the main approaches to the study of personality?

In psychological terms, personality refers to our characteristic ways of responding to individuals and situations; it consists of unique and relatively stable qualities that characterise an individual's behaviour across situations over a period of time. It has physical and psychological components, is fairly unique to each person, does not change easily, yet is dynamic and adaptive to internal and external demands. The word comes from the Latin persona, the mask worn by actors in Roman theatre. The main approaches are: (1) the type approach and the trait approach, along with the interactional view; (2) the psychodynamic approach (Freud and the post-Freudians such as Jung, Adler, Horney, Fromm and Erikson); (3) the behavioural approach; (4) the cultural approach; and (5) the humanistic approach (Rogers and Maslow).

Q4 What is trait approach to personality? How does it differ from type approach?

The trait approach describes personality in terms of specific psychological attributes along which individuals differ in consistent and stable ways. A trait is a relatively enduring attribute on which one person differs from another, such as shyness or friendliness. Traits are relatively stable over time, generally consistent across situations, and vary in strength and combination across individuals. Allport (cardinal, central and secondary traits), Cattell (16 source traits, 16PF) and Eysenck (neuroticism, extraversion and psychoticism) are major trait theorists. The type approach instead tries to understand personality by examining broad patterns of observed behaviour; each pattern is a type, and people are placed in a type by the similarity of their behaviour to that pattern. Examples are Hippocrates' four humours, Sheldon's body types, Jung's introvert and extravert, and Type-A and Type-B. Thus types put people into categories, while traits rate them by degree along dimensions.

Q5 How does Freud explain the structure of personality?

Freud saw the primary structural elements of personality as id, ego and superego. These are concepts, not physical structures, and are inferred from behaviour. The id is the source of instinctual energy; it seeks immediate gratification of primitive, sexual and aggressive impulses, works on the pleasure principle, and ignores morality and society. The ego grows out of the id and satisfies instinctual needs in accordance with reality; it works on the reality principle and is patient and reasonable. The superego is the moral branch of mental functioning; it internalises parental authority through socialisation, tells the id and ego whether gratification is ethical, and helps control the id. These three are competing forces in the unconscious, and their relative strength determines a person's stability. The id is energised by life and death instincts; the life (sexual) instinct is libido. The ego handles anxiety through defence mechanisms such as repression, projection, denial, reaction formation and rationalisation.

Q6 How would Horney's explanation of depression be different from that of Alfred Adler?

Horney and Adler would trace depression to different childhood roots. Horney held that psychological disorders arise from disturbed interpersonal relationships in childhood. When parents are indifferent, discouraging or erratic, the child feels insecure, a feeling called basic anxiety, and develops deep resentment (basic hostility) towards the parents. Isolation and helplessness then interfere with healthy development. On this view, depression would stem from early insecurity and troubled relationships with parents. Adler's individual psychology holds that behaviour is purposeful and goal-directed. Every person suffers from feelings of inadequacy and guilt, the inferiority complex, arising in childhood. If it is not overcome through goals that give security, development is hindered. On this view, depression would stem from an unresolved inferiority complex and failure to pursue meaningful goals.

Q7 What is the main proposition of humanistic approach to personality? What did Maslow mean by self-actualisation?

The humanistic approach, developed mainly by Rogers and Maslow in response to Freud's theory, focuses on subjective experience, choice and the positive aspects of life. Its main proposition is that people are innately good and have an inborn tendency to express their capabilities, potentials and talents to the fullest and to actualise their inherited nature; fulfilment is the motivating force of personality development. Rogers speaks of the fully functioning person, whose real self and ideal self correspond. Maslow used self-actualisation for the state in which people have reached their own fullest potential. In his hierarchy of needs, biological, security and belongingness needs are survival needs shared with animals; the real journey of human life begins with the pursuit of self-esteem and self-actualisation needs. Maslow held that human beings have potentialities for love, joy and creative work, and are free to shape their lives and self-actualise.

Q8 Discuss the main observational methods used in personality assessment. What problems do we face in using these methods?

Behavioural analysis rests on an observer's report, which may draw on interview, observation, ratings, nomination and situational tests. In an interview the assessor asks specific questions; it may be unstructured (forming an impression) or structured (set questions and procedure, enabling objective comparison). Observation means watching a person's behaviour with trained guidelines, for example a clinical psychologist observing a client with family members. Behavioural ratings are given by people who know the person well, placing individuals in categories; clearly defined behavioural anchors are needed. Nomination asks group members to choose peers for an activity and give reasons. Situational tests, such as the situational stress test, observe behaviour in a staged situation. Problems: observation and interview need demanding, time-consuming training and a mature psychologist, and the observer's presence may contaminate behaviour. Ratings suffer from the halo effect and from middle-category or extreme-response bias. Nominations may be affected by personal biases.

Q9 What is meant by structured personality tests? Which are the two most widely used structured personality tests?

Structured personality tests, also called self-report measures, are fairly structured, often theory-based measures in which the subject gives verbal responses on some rating scale (for example true or false) about her or his own feelings. The method follows Allport's suggestion that the best way to assess a person is to ask the person. Responses are accepted at face value, scored quantitatively and interpreted using test norms. The two most widely used, as described in the chapter, are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), developed by Hathaway and McKinley, and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ). The MMPI-2 has 567 true-false statements in 10 subscales, used for psychiatric diagnosis. The EPQ assesses introversion-extraversion, emotional stability and, later, psychoticism. The 16PF by Cattell is also widely used. These measures suffer from social desirability and acquiescence.

Q10 Explain how projective techniques assess personality. Which projective tests of personality are widely used by psychologists?

Projective techniques are indirect methods developed to assess unconscious motives and feelings, which direct methods cannot reach because people become self-conscious and answer in socially desirable ways. They assume that an unstructured or less structured stimulus lets the person project her or his feelings, desires and needs onto it, and experts interpret these projections. Features: stimuli are unstructured and poorly defined, the person is not told the purpose or scoring method, there are no right or wrong answers, each response is taken as revealing, and scoring is lengthy and sometimes subjective. They need specialised training and have reliability and validity problems, yet are useful. Widely used tests are the Rorschach Inkblot Test (10 inkblots), the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT, 30 picture cards and one blank card), Rosenzweig's Picture-Frustration Study, the Sentence Completion Test and the Draw-a-Person Test.

Q11 Arihant wants to become a singer even though he belongs to a family of doctors. Though his family members claim to love him but strongly disapprove his choice of career. Using Carl Rogers' terminology, describe the attitudes shown by Arihant's family.

Rogers said a healthy self-concept needs an atmosphere of unconditional positive regard, in which a person is accepted as worthwhile whatever he chooses. Arihant's family shows the opposite: their love is conditional, offered only if he follows the family's expectations of becoming a doctor. This lack of unconditional positive regard can lower his self-concept and self-esteem, since Rogers noted that negative social conditions produce low self-esteem. Arihant's ideal self, a singer, is also at odds with the self the family wants, and a discrepancy between real self and ideal self brings unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Rogers' remedy is client-centred therapy, which creates unconditional positive regard so the person can self-actualise; accepting his choice would support his growth as a fully functioning person.