CHAPTER VII
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION
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What the term level of aspiration meant was a subject of controversy among the early investigators. The controversy or dispute arose out of the attempts made by some of them to apply objective methods to determine the goal-setting phenomenon that was defined in a vague and subjective way by Hoppe (1930). Later on it was felt that the concept of level of aspiration needed reformulation so as to make it clear, precise, and objectively demonstrable. As reformulated, it referred to the goal a person indicated he would work for in a task at a given time (Gardner, 1940; Lewin and et al., 1944).

The first recorded observation on level of aspiration was made by a German psychologist, Dembo, I., in the year 1930 while she was studying the effect which a situation of threat produced on the behaviour of her subjects. She observed that the behaviour of setting one's own goal, to be designated as level of aspiration, was utilized by her subjects to cope with a highly over-demanding situation. Since then a large number of studies have been carried out on level of aspiration, but
surprisingly enough the coping aspect of the behaviour has not been adequately explored. The present piece of research in which the coping aspect of goal-setting behaviour has been studied in relation to two such personality factors as are considered to be theoretically meaningful to this aspect of behaviour, represents an attempt in this direction. The main objective of the study were three-fold:

(a) To find out whether stress produced certain modes of defense in goal-setting behaviour.

(b) To ascertain whether the mode of defense a person manifests in his goal-setting behaviour under stress was related to ego-strength and rigidity.

(c) To determine whether persons differing in these personality characteristics also differed in goal-setting behaviour in a stress-free situation.

While going through the literature on the concept and measurement of level of aspiration, it was noted that attempts made earlier to define the concept operationally by specifying certain measuring operations, such as asking the subject to state the goal he expected to achieve, made many investigators think that the goal so elicited was not the true goal of the
subject. It was argued that while setting the goal publicly, that is, in the presence of the experimenter, the subject tended to keep in mind the impression which the goal was likely to create upon the experimenter, and hence the goal that he stated was not necessarily the goal that he actually expected to achieve. This doubt was repeated by many investigators from time to time. Some investigators even employed a semi-structured projective technique to circumvent the tendency towards defensiveness, which the method of direct verbal expression was thought to be producing in the subject.

To verify if the doubt referred to above was really true, an experiment was performed to find out if the level of aspiration expressed 'publicly' showed any discrepancy from the level of aspiration expressed 'privately'. The results showed that the level of aspiration expressed publicly, that is, in a situation where the experimenter knew who the subject was and had full opportunity to watch what he did, showed no discrepancy from the level of aspiration expressed privately, that is, in a situation in which the anonymity of the subject was fully ensured and the opportunity to watch what he did was completely denied to the experimenter. Hence, the doubt regarding the validity of the method of direct verbal expression was totally unfounded.
The review of literature on level of aspiration was confined to studies having a direct or indirect bearing on the problem at hand. The concept and nature of each of the three factors used in the study, namely, stress, ego-strength, and rigidity was examined in some detail.

Stress was conceived to be occurring when an individual perceived a situation as a threat to his ego or self-esteem and reacted to it in such a way as to mitigate the threat. The reaction which the individual made to the situation was defensive or realistic, depending upon whether it did or did not involve the use of nonadaptive means to meet the situation.

Studies on the effect of stress on level of aspiration, which were very few in number and suffered from certain serious methodological inadequacies, indicated that failure-induced stress resulted in low, protective pattern of goal-setting. There was also some indication that this pattern of defensive goal-setting was resorted to by sensitizers and not by repressors (Chance, 1960).

The personality determinants of level of aspiration had been studied with clinical, correlational, and experimental approaches. Clinical studies suggested that factors like ambition, perseverance, self-confidence, realism, cautiousness,
acceptance of failure etc., might be relevant for goal-setting behavior (Gardner, 1940; Sears, 1941; Rotter, 1945, 1954). Independent measures of personality characteristics, it was pointed out, were generally not employed by these investigators. Correlational studies using independent measures of personality factors indicated that adjustment-maladjustment and certain other factors that were closely related to it tended to have a curvilinear type of relationship with level of aspiration. The results, though not free from inconsistency, showed that persons with poor adjustment set either very high or very low level goals while those with good adjustment set their goals closer to but slightly above the level of past performance (Gruen, 1945, Dean, 1953). The studies employing experimental, that is, the contrasting group method, were shown to have brought out the importance of motivational factors like n-achievement, fear of failure, and anxiety for level of aspiration. Persons with high n-achievement set higher level goals than persons with low n-achievement on first few trials only, when reality determinants of level of aspiration operated at a minimum (Kausler and Trapp, 1958; Mukherjee, 1965). Fear of failure in isolation as well as in interaction with n-achievement (Moulton, 1965), and anxiety (Watson, 1965) produced erratic shifts in the level of aspiration, that is, the goals were lowered following success, and were raised following failure.
As regards the personality factors used in the present study, namely, ego-strength and rigidity, the survey of literature revealed that whereas no study had been carried out to investigate the relationship between ego-strength and level of aspiration, there were some studies on the relationship between level of aspiration and rigidity. It seemed that persons with high rigidity tended to make fewer shifts in the level of aspiration than persons with low rigidity, particularly if the situation was not well structured. The results on the relationship between rigidity and shifts in level of aspiration, however, were too inconsistent to permit any generalization.

Two modes of defensive goal-settings, high and low, were derived from Escalona's theory of choice behaviour as applied to level of aspiration. Whether a person employed the former or the latter mode of defense when subjected to a situation that threatened his self-esteem was expected to depend on his being of strong or weak ego. The factor of ego-strength was given a prominent place among the personality factors regarded by Lazarus (1966) as being conceptually relevant to coping behaviour. This factor was characterized by realism, drive, self-confidence, capacity to meet difficult situations, and power to rally from set-backs, etc., (Barron, 1968). Another factor that seemed to be relevant to the coping aspect of goal-
setting behaviour, particularly to the responsiveness of the goal to changes in performance, was rigidity which referred to a tendency to perseverate in thinking and responses even when they were inadequate to meet the demands of a situation. A rigid person, it was expected, would be reluctant, and a flexible person eager to shift his goal when placed in a stressful situation.

As the situation occurring in a common level of aspiration experiment was unambiguous and achievement-oriented, it was predicted that differences in ego-strength and rigidity would not show up in the goal-setting behaviour of the individuals, unless the situation became either less structured or stressful. It was, however, expected that the differences in the dispositional tendencies of the individuals would get a chance to express out when they set the goals for the first time, because the situation at that moment was not so structured.

A 2 x 2 x 3 factorial design was followed for carrying out the experiment for the present study, as each one of the two personality factors used in the study, namely, ego-strength and rigidity was varied at two levels and stress, the third and the main variable, was varied at three levels. A letter-symbol substitution test (Ansari and Ansari, 1964) was used for
measuring the level of aspiration. Hindi adaptations of Barron's Ego-Strength and Gaugh Sanford Rigidity Scales were administered on a population of 800 undergraduate students of Aligarh, and the data were dichotomised in order to draw subjects of high and low ego-strength and high and low rigidity from those falling above 75th and below 25th percentiles respectively on the scales. The four groups of subjects thus formed were designated as high ego-strength—high rigidity, high ego-strength—low rigidity, low ego-strength—high rigidity, and low ego-strength—low rigidity groups.

There were three conditions of the experiment - no-stress, low stress and high stress. Under no-stress or normal condition the standard procedure for studying level of aspiration was followed. That is, on each trial the subject before starting the task stated the number of codes he expected to complete in the allotted time, then worked on the task, and after the time was over, wrote down the number of codes he had actually completed. Under low and high stress conditions the procedure for studying level of aspiration remained the same except that in the former condition a low level threat, and in the latter condition a high level threat was administered to the subjects through specially designed instructions, disparaging remarks,
unfavourable comparison, etc. The essential elements underlying the procedure intended to produce a low level threat, were the impressions given to the subject that he was liable to be compared unfavourably in relation to other persons and to be judged as a person of low ability. The high stress procedure, apart from the factors employed for inducing low stress, included the presence of the observer, his passing of disparaging remarks, and telling the subject that the information obtained about the level of his mental ability would be made available to his teachers and class-mates as the additional stressing factors. The effectiveness of the procedures devised to produce the low and high level stress was established empirically.

The analysis of variance of the data revealed that ego-strength made a significant contribution to the variance in the goal-discrepancy scores, rigidity to the variance in the shift scores, and stress to the variances in both. For the I-bid scores the F was significant at .01 level for ego-strength, and at .05 level for stress. The main patterns of results and the interpretations offered to account for them were as follows:

Neither the subjects who differed in ego-strength nor the subjects who differed in rigidity showed any difference in goal-setting behaviour under normal or no-stress condition.
The high ego-strength subjects, however, differed from the low ego-strength subjects in the I-bids, with the former having made higher I-bids than the latter. This supported the contention that dispositional differences do not show up in a typical level of aspiration situation, because the situation is unambiguous and achievement-oriented, but they do show up when the situation becomes somewhat ambiguous, such as the one that exists at the time of making the first bids.

Low stress made no effect on the level of aspiration of high ego-strength persons, but high stress did, making them set unrealistically high level goals, irrespective of whether they were of rigid or flexible disposition. The setting of unattainably high level goals in these persons was interpreted as being due to an unrealistically exaggerated tendency of defiance to threat, which presumably the condition of high stress had evoked in them.

Low ego-strength persons became defensive in setting their goals, as predicted, not only under high stress but also under low stress condition, but unlike persons of high ego-strength they did not show any consistency in the mode of defense they manifested to cope with the stress. Surprisingly enough, they employed the defensive modes of both high and low
goal-setting, depending upon not only whether they were of high or low rigidity, but also whether they were exposed to low or high stress condition. In a situation where the changes in behaviour depended upon the interaction of three separate factors, it was very difficult to offer any clear cut interpretation.

As regards the shifts in the level of aspiration, the results revealed that under low stress high rigid persons decreased, and low rigid persons increased their shifts. They had shown a slight trend in the same direction under normal condition also. The presence of low level threat to self-esteem seemed to facilitate the expression of dispositional tendency towards rigidity - flexibility in goal-setting behaviour. However, when the threat to self-esteem became very severe, both high and low rigid persons decreased the shifts in their level of aspiration considerably. This was explained as being due to a constriction in the cognitive field which a strong level threat had possibly produced in them, leading to fixity or stereotypy in their goal-setting behaviour.

An important finding of the study not related directly to the problem of the present research was that the height and responsiveness in the level of aspiration was not related to
the same factors of personality. The results showed that the height in the level of aspiration was related to ego-strength, and the shifts in the level of aspiration to rigidity. It was suggested that a thorough and specially designed research was called for to ascertain further whether the two aspects of the goal-setting behaviour were related to two different patterns of personality characteristics, and if so, why.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Dispositional factors related to the coping behaviour, namely, ego-strength and rigidity, do not show up in a typical, that is, normal level of aspiration situation. When the situation becomes ambiguous or stressful, however, these dispositional factors exert their effect on the goal-setting behaviour.

2. Stress leads to both high and low modes of defensive goal-settings, as predicted according to the theory of Escalona.

3. Whether a person sets his goal realistically or defensively depends upon the magnitude of stress as also upon the level of rigidity. While high ego-strength persons remain realistic, low ego-strength persons become defensive in their
goal-settings under low stress condition. When stress becomes severe both high and low ego-strength persons become defensive in their goal-setting behaviour.

4. The mode of defensive goal-setting which characterises high ego-strength persons, is setting of high level goals. Low ego-strength persons become too inconsistent under stress to permit a clear identification of any particular mode of defense in their goal-setting behaviour.

5. Under low stress condition the dispositional tendency of rigidity-flexibility exerts its effect on shifts in the level of aspiration, rigid persons making much fewer shifts than flexible persons.

6. Under high stress condition both rigid and flexible persons show a marked tendency towards stereotypy in goal-setting behaviour.

7. The two preceding findings indicate that a change in the magnitude of stress may not necessarily produce the same kind of effect in behaviour.

8. How high a person sets his goal and how readily he adjusts it to changes in his performance depend upon different personality characteristics. This, however, needs a further and a more thorough investigation.