George Kelly’s Psychology of Personal Constructs

Constructs are used to make sense of the world, to try to predict events, and essentially to build one’s terrain map of the world and how to function within it.

The Person’s Constructs and Personality

- Personal Construct Theory: tries to see how the person sees and aligns events on his or her own dimensions.
  - Seeks to illuminate the person’s own constructs rather than the hypotheses of the psychologist.
  - Different people may construe the same event differently and every event can be construed in alternative ways.

Characteristics of Personal Constructs

- **Bipolar**: pair of characteristics that are psychological opposites for the person, *not necessarily logical opposites*.
  - Ex. “logically” vs. un-aggressive
    “personally” vs. aggressive vs. weak
- **Emergent Pole**: the side of the construct that is applied in a characterization
  - Ex. “my father is aggressive.”
- **Implicit Pole**: the side that was not applied
  - Ex. the opposite of “aggressive,” whatever that may be for an individual

∴ You can’t know what another person means unless you find out; don’t assume you know what only the construct’s user knows.

Constructs vary with regard to other characteristics;

Permeability

- Highly permeable construct is one into which a wide range of information can fit
- Impermeable construct implies that unless the person or behavior characterized fits a relatively narrow range, it can’t be “good” (e.g. must be consistent with one’s own faith)

Exploring Personal Constructs

- **Role Construct Repertory Test** (“Rep Test”): Kelly’s operation for measuring a construct
  - Asked to list many people/things that are important to you.
  - Asked to consider them in groups of three
    - In each triad you must indicate how two items are similar to each other and different from the third
  This way, the subjective dimensions of similarity among event, and the subjective opposites of those dimensions, may be evoked systematically.
(not sure if Gary W. section is important or not…)

→ Personal Construct Conceptualization of Gary W.
  - Rationality – Emotionality
    - Relationships with woman in terms as “spiritual,” “instinctive,” & “sublime.”
      Characterized by intense feeling and primacy of emotions, based of physical attraction.
    - Real friendships are based on rational grounds, such as interests and common ways of
      thinking in both parties.
  - Power & Control – Dependence & Weakness
  - Security – Liberty
    - ‘blind obedience’ vs. ‘judging issues for oneself’ ←

Behavioral Referents For Personal Constructs

Some of Gary’s main personal constructs emerged from his self-descriptions and verbalizations.
- When people start to express their constructs, they usually being with very diffuse,
  oversimplified, global terms.

  What can the assessor do with these verbalizations?
    - With a statement, “I’m so lost”; instead of inquiring into why the person feels “lost,”
      personal construct assessments try to discover referents for just what the statement
      means. An analyses of what they mean.

Exploring the Meaning Underlying Puzzling Behavior Patterns

Example: John, a new staff attorney, whose performance varies in his work. Distracted during
meetings at headquarters, but not so during meetings at branch offices. Why?
- A method for systematically and objectively assessing the meaning of a situation to a given
  individual
  1. Headquarters may be characterized by features such as the presence of the boss, the
     authority whose opinions directly influence promotion and salary decisions
  2. May be the presence of highly competitive “career climbers,” who focus only on
     advancement of their individual careers.
- Subjective meaning of the situations may be understood by a person’s tendency to
  selectively attend to particular types of features.
  1. While some people may not even notice the career-advance focus of their colleagues
     at headquarters, for others like John, it is highly salient.

People As Scientists

Just like the scientist who studies them, human participants also construe behavior – categorizing,
interpreting, labeling, and judging themselves and their world.

  Kelly noted that psychological scientist view themselves as “motivated to achieve cognitive carity
  and to understand phenomena.”
    - “subjects” of their theories are seen as “unaware victims of psychic forces and traits that
      they can neither understand nor control.
  Kelly tries to remove this discrepancy between theorist and participant.
    - “Every person is a scientist.”
  - Constructs can be known only through behavior. We cannot know what another person means
    by what they say.

Constructive Alternativism

- Constructive Alternativism: the same events can be alternatively categorized; while people may
  not always be able to change event, they can always construe them differently.
A person’s activities are guided by the constructs he/she uses to predict events; how the individual predicts or anticipates events.

- **Convenience of Constructs**: rather than try to assess whether a particular construct is true, Kelly’s approach attends to its convenience or utility for the constructor.
  - Rather than try to assess whether or not a client is “getting depressed” or “going crazy,” one tries to discover the implications for the client’s life of construing himself that way.
  - If construction is not convenient, then the task is to find a better alternative, one that predicts better and leads to better outcomes; Modification.

**Roles: Many Ways To Be**

- **Role**: an attempt to see another person through the other’s glasses (through his/her constructs) and to structure one’s actions in that light.
  - Kelly saw humans as capable of enacting many different roles and of engaging in continuous change.
  - May help the person to select more satisfactory modes of construing the world.

**Self-Determination**

- Kelly rejected the idea of specific motives.
  - Believed that no special concepts are required to understand why people are motivated and active (like Rogers).
  - Believed that the individual is what he does and comes to know his nature by seeing what he is doing (like existentialists).
    - “existence precedes essence” – man simply is, and he is nothing else but what he makes of himself.

→Common Themes and Issues←

**The World As Perceived**

Work at the Phenomenological-Humanistic Level of analysis focuses on the self as experienced, and the situations encountered as perceived by the individual.

**Potential For Growth, Change, and Freedom**

- Theorists proposed that people do not have to be victimized by their biographies (Kelly)