

What Is a Personal Construct?

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At its simplest, a construct is a jargon term embedded centrally within George Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory. It is the unit of his theory and that which is commonly thought to be measured in some form of repertory grid. It is a porthole through which we peer to make sense of the events swirling about us. One property of a construct is bipolarity. I am therefore going to start by telling you two things I think a construct is NOT before telling you what I think it is—that is, I am going to start by defining its opposite pole.

What a Construct Is NOT

Constructs are not concepts

However, they're not *totally* different. A construct does share some similarities with a concept. Both are concerned with similarity between things—cups, for instance—which make them different from other things. Both involve the notion of abstraction.

But who *says* which things are similar and thereby different from others? There is a not always implicit notion that things really are different and that a *concept* is a property of things as they really are. In contrast, a *construct* is something that is created by an individual, personally. Its reality exists, not in the things themselves, but in the interpretative act of the individual person.

Whereas a concept is a way in which cups are alike and thereby different from all other things, a construct is a way in which cups are alike *in contrast* to some other things. The concept of “cups” is *different from* the concept

of “saucers.” Thus the opposite of “cups” is “not cups.” The construct of “cups” may well have an opposite which is “saucers.” The opposite of a construct is not irrelevance but is a matter of contrast. It is one of the assumptions of personal construct theory that people think in terms of contrast. This notion of bipolarity is central in personal construct counseling, as we shall see.

A construct is not a rule

In spite of what Theodore Mischel wrote in his 1964 paper entitled “Personal Constructs, Rules and the Logic of Clinical Activity,” constructs are not rules. As Tschudi (1983) pointed out, Mischel’s argument that constructs are rules and that Kelly’s attempt to promote them as predictive devices is invalid is, itself, invalid. The arguments are complex and cannot be covered with justice within this talk.

An essential feature of a construct is that it is the basis of our predictions about ourselves in relation to our world. As I shall emphasize later, personal construct counseling and therapy is based on the fundamental premise that change can only come about if a person is able to find alternative ways of construing—and thereby predicting—the problem situation. The person has to reconstrue.

Constructs are not rules and they are not concepts

What a Construct IS

So, what are constructs? I want to mention 10 main features that define a construct for me.

It is an abstraction

First, a construct is an abstraction. It is a way in which an individual makes sense of events and the world. We abstract our OWN meanings from the swirl of events confronting us and thereby impose our OWN meanings on the world. Constructs are indeed personal.

It is bipolar

Second, a construct is bipolar. It is a way of discriminating between things, events, people. It is a way in which some things are seen as being the same and *by that same token* as different from others—it consists of two poles.

It makes more psychological sense to point to a window and say “That is not a door” than to point to a leaf and say “That is not a door.” Constructs are pathways of movement. We may not find it too exciting to move from seeing something as a door to seeing it as a window—unless of course we want to walk through it—but it makes a big difference to a woman to move from seeing herself as an unattractive fat slob to being a slim attractive female.

A knowledge of what a client construes as being the opposite of a course of action or self-perception is vital for the counselor or anyone trying to understand themselves or others. Only then can we glimpse possible answers to such questions as “What is that person NOT doing by doing what he IS doing?” Or, “What are the penalties involved in moving from being a fat slob to being an attractive slim woman?” Something is preventing change—what is it? The answer often lies at the contrast end of the construing.

It is linked to fellow constructs

I have been guilty of distorting the theory of personal constructs somewhat by forcing myself to talk as if “the construct” exists alone, as a discrete entity. It is not and does not. A third feature of a construct is that it is linked in a hierarchical structure. It is through this hierarchical structure that we view and experience the world.

This notion of hierarchy is used when trying to understand the relative importance of issues. The procedure of “laddering” is vital here (Hinkle, 1965). This helps the person spell out the ways in which they construe the world at higher and higher levels of abstraction. These superordinate personal constructs are the mainsprings of our existence. As Hinkle and others have shown, the higher, the more abstract, the more superordinate a construct is, the more it is likely to resist change. This enables an explanation to be given, for example, as to why it is that a manager is failing in his current job. The job has changed from being one in which the essence of being a good manager is to ensure that everyone does what they are supposed to do, to a new style of facilitative management, where caring for and interest in the individual are paramount.

The counselor may find that the manager construes himself as someone who must always have control of his world—loss of control threatens him with personal chaos. Providing an environment in which staff can work at their best means loss of control over events—control is handed over to others.

No wonder he has problems. He is being asked to behave in a way that is foreign to him. He can no longer predict his own behavior let alone

that of others. In such a situation the manager might find his current experiences of the world intolerable. He may construe his feelings as indicating he is “unwell.” Perhaps he sees himself as—or someone else says he is—depressed. He comes to the counselor with “depression.” The personal construct counselor will regard this symptom from the theoretical perspective that it is “a way of giving meaning to otherwise chaotic experiences.”

Constructs are used at different levels of awareness

As well as talking as if constructs were discrete units—which they are not—I have been talking as if all constructs are available in conscious awareness. My fourth point is that they are not. The level at which we are operating here is highly cognitive. But that manager did not consciously “decide” to “be depressed.”

If you were now to redirect your focus of attention—if you have not done so already—to what else you are experiencing, you may find visceral or autonomic sensations which you construe as indicating that you are annoyed, excited, anxious, or just plain bored. Your constructs are operating at nonverbal levels of awareness. Our guts often tell us that we do not like a stranger long before we have consciously worked out why. Sometimes our behavior remains a puzzle to us for a long time—perhaps some people here still have behaviors that they do not really understand. This would suggest nonverbal construing at work. Our constructs, at whatever level we are using them to make sense of the world, link directly to our behavior.

A construct is the basis of anticipation and prediction

Fifth, when we interpret (construe) a situation in a certain way, we are thereby making predictions about what will come next.

The meaning of the construct is embedded in the theory’s Fundamental Postulate and its first elaborative corollary to do with construction. These state that *a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which they anticipate events* and that we anticipate events *by construing their replications*. We look at the undifferentiated flow of events before us and note that something repeats itself. We abstract the nature of these observed replications in events and note how these differ from others. We have formed a construct. By noting an event as something that is being repeated, we are able to predict the future course of events.

At a simple level, I may construe my pain in the head as a headache. I may move on from that and say “If you have a headache, take an aspirin because

they are good for headaches.” That may look like Mischel’s rule, but a prediction is involved—“My headache will get better if I take an aspirin.”

Constructs are ways of controlling our world

Sixth, the better able we are to predict our world, the more control we have over it. Kelly says:

Constructs are the channels in which one’s mental processes run. They are two-way streets along which one may travel to reach conclusions. They make it possible to anticipate the changing tide of events . . . constructs are the controls that one places upon life—the life within him as well as the life which is external to him. (Kelly, 1955, p. 126)

Control over our personal worlds comes with the ability to predict and having these predictions validated—at whatever level of awareness the construing is taking place. This could be taken as a part-statement of optimal functioning.

Constructs are inseparable from our behavior

Our behavior is the way in which we test out those predictions resulting from the constructs we are using to make sense of an event. My behavior here is based on my understanding (construing) of what is required of me. I make certain predictions about such events as this. There are, indeed, implicit rules governing how you and I behave. But they are not immutable facts. They are still predictions. I will not know whether or not my predictions are correct *until I have “behaved.”* If, in the course of this talk, I see evidence invalidating my predictions—you all start pulling faces—I have a number of courses of action open to me. One is to acknowledge that I got it wrong. I might try some other ways of construing the situation. Perhaps I have wandered into the wrong place—perhaps this is where people get mass facials—but whatever way I decide to reconstrue and make sense of the situation, the very act of reconstruing means that I will change my behavior. *Because behavior is the experiment we conduct to test out the validity of our construing currently being put to the test.*

Kelly’s notion that all behavior is an experiment is one of the unique features of personal construct theory and is crucial to working within this framework. Seeing the client as a personal scientist and his or her behavior as an experiment results in the relationship being one of inquiry rather than

interpretation. The essential question becomes “What is the basis of this experiment my client is conducting that makes him or her behave in this self-defeating way?” Gone is any attempt at imposing a counseling program on the client based upon some theoretical interpretation of the client’s behavior. The client and only the client has the answers. The counselor’s job is to help the client find out what those answers are.

Just as constructs are inseparable from behavior, so they
are from feelings

The invalidation I could experience here if I thought I had got it badly wrong could be enormously threatening to me. I might not react to invalidation by simply reconstruing the event. I might argue (not necessarily at a conscious level of awareness) that I had got it wrong on this occasion, but that this did not invalidate me as a person who, by and large, gets these sorts of things right. Or I could decide that this is the *n*th time I had got it wrong. The evidence has to be accepted. This would then mean that I was no longer the sort of person I thought I was. That would indeed have far-reaching implications for me—it would be a threat of profound proportions.

We experience emotions when we are aware that our constructs and our use of them are either about to change radically or are not up to the job at hand. Threats of major proportions may involve constructs that are “core.” Such constructs have no verbal labels. We have probably created them at a very early age. They are to do with our “life processes.” Because they have never been given verbal labels they can only operate via experience, feelings, or somatic functions. These core constructs relate to psychosomatic problems. They may also be related to “acting out” behavior. For, as Kelly says, what can you do with a nonverbal construct except behave it either via action or our body?

When faced with a client who appears to have problems involving core constructs, the person’s whole being is involved. It will be a long and hard road for the client. In my view, this is an area that separates counseling from psychotherapy.

Constructs form the basis of choice

Personal construct theory suggests that we have certain freedoms. For instance, we are free to choose whether or not we see ourselves as *reliable* or *not caring about time*. That is, our freedom of choice lies in moving from one pole of our constructs to the other. But this choice is also determined by our perception of what is likely to lead to the greater elaboration and

definition of our whole construct systems. Sitting in the car in a traffic jam, it may seem a most desirable thing to change myself from someone who is *reliable* to someone who *does not care about time*. But this one possible change confronts me with a series of other changes. That construct has linkages throughout my “system.” I may heave a sigh of relief and conclude that life will offer much more for me as a “not caring about time person” and I wonder why it has taken me so long to discover this. However, I suddenly start to feel something very bad is happening as I come up against a basic personal value. This says that people who are *reliable* are people who *think others are important*, whereas those who *do not care about time* are *self-centered and uncaring of others*. I do not change. I may accept the fact that I have got myself into this situation and that no amount of horn-blowing is going to make any difference. I reconstrue the situation as one in which—“Yes, I am going to be late—and I am sorry for this and for those waiting. But I am going to make sure that next time I allow for the possibility of traffic being bad.” Irrational beliefs may be consciously acknowledged but reconstruing will only take place if it does not violate some superordinate construct.

The Choice Corollary provides personal construct theory with its motivational aspect. I strive to move in those directions that are likely to provide me with the chance of the greater extension and elaboration of my system. The person who has been obese since childhood continues to be so because it is from this perspective that he has the greater chance of developing himself. That may look strange at first sight. But not if you consider his alternatives. He has none. He has been obese as long as he can remember. For him to suddenly become slim would be to step into an unknown world of how he relates to people. For the world we know is the one in which we have the greater opportunity to develop—however we may dislike aspects of it. The way to change is to learn what sort of a person we will be when inhabiting the world to which we want to move. We do this by reconstruing.

Constructs and Counseling

I want to look specifically at constructs and counseling. Constructs are not in any way “things” to be sorted out. They are the directions in which a person moves in living. In counseling that direction comes from the client and not the counselor. The relationship is one in which counselor and client work together in the task of getting the client on the move again; developing new constructs or modifying old that result in greater predictive success in the direction in which the client wants to move.

Helping another reconstrue is not easy. An essential skill the personal construct counselor must have is the ability to subsume—dwell within—the client’s construing system. The counselor puts their own construing system—with all its value-laden constructs—to one side, so as to dwell within the client’s construing system for moments at a time so as to minimize the risk of distortion. The goal is to view the client’s ways of experiencing the world through the set of professional constructs spelled out in personal construct theory. These may be to do with identification of areas of dangerously loose construing—perhaps indicative of thought disorder; regnant construing—shades of rational emotive therapy’s mustabations; areas of constriction; the involvement of preverbal core construing and so forth. When the counselor has an idea of what is holding the client back from moving in their chosen direction, possible alternative directions appear. There are, after all, always alternative ways of looking at any event.

In Summary

The ways in which we experience the world relate to the system of personal constructs we have created to make sense of that world. They are an integral part of the ways in which we behave and feel. Our personal constructs are the ways in which we experience our being.

Note

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