Feist, J. & Feist G. (2021). Theories of Personality (10th Edition). New York: McGraw Hill.

Chapter 19
Kelly: Psychology of Personal Constructs

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:

1. State Kelly's philosophical position of constructive alternativism.
2. Discuss the fundamental postulate of Kelly's theory.
3. List and explain the 11 supporting corollaries to the fundamental postulate of personal construct theory.
4. Define Kelly's concept of role, including core role and peripheral role.
5. Discuss Kelly's views on abnormal development.
6. Define threat from Kelly's point of view.
7. Define anxiety from Kelly's point of view.
8. Describe the procedure for fixed-role therapy.
9. Explain the use of the Rep Test in personality assessment.
10. Discuss recent research using the Rep Test.

Lecture Outline

I. Overview of Personal Construct Theory

George Kelly's theory of personal constructs is a "metatheory," or a theory about theories. According to Kelly, all people (including those who build personality theories) anticipate events by the meanings or interpretations they place on those events (Stevens & Walker, 2002). These meanings or interpretations are called *constructs*. People exist in a real world, but their behavior is shaped by their gradually expanding interpretation or *construction* of that world. People are not victims of circumstances, because alternative constructions are always available. Kelly called this philosophical position *constructive alternativism*.

II. Biography of George Kelly

George Alexander Kelly was born on April 28, 1905, on a farm near Perth, Kansas, a tiny, almost nonexistent town 35 miles south of Wichita. George was the only child of Elfleda M. Kelly, a former schoolteacher, and Theodore V. Kelly, an ordained Presbyterian minister. By the time Kelly was born, his father had given up the ministry in favor of becoming a Kansas farmer.

His undergraduate degree was in physics and mathematics, but he was also a member of the college debate team and, as such, became intensely concerned with social problems. This

interest led him to the University of Kansas, where he received a master's degree with a major in educational sociology and a minor in labor relations and sociology. During the next few years, Kelly moved several times and held a variety of positions. He enrolled at the State University of Iowa and, in 1931, completed a PhD with a dissertation on common factors in speech and reading disabilities. Once again, Kelly returned to Kansas, beginning his academic career in 1931 at Fort Hays State College in Hays, Kansas, by teaching physiological psychology.

During World War II, Kelly joined the Navy as an aviation psychologist. After the war, he taught at the University of Maryland for a year and then, in 1946, joined the faculty at Ohio State University as a professor and director of their psychological clinic. There he worked with Julian Rotter, who succeeded him as director of the clinic. In 1965, he accepted a position at Brandeis University, where, for a brief time, he was a colleague of A. H. Maslow. From his days at Fort Hays State, Kelly began to formulate a theory of personality. Kelly died on March 6, 1967, before he could complete revisions of his theory of personal constructs.

III. Kelly's Philosophical Position

Is human behavior based on reality or on people's perception of reality? George Kelly would say *both*. He did not accept Skinner's position that behavior is shaped by the environment, that is, reality. On the other hand, he also rejected extreme **phenomenology** (Combs & Snygg, 1959), which holds that the only reality is what people perceive. Kelly (1955, 1991) believed that the universe is real, but that different people construe it in different ways. Thus, people's **personal constructs**, or ways of interpreting and explaining events, hold the key to predicting their behavior. Personal construct theory does not try to explain nature. Rather, it is a theory of people's *construction* of events, that is, their personal inquiry into their world.

A. Person as Scientist

Like all other people (including scientists), one's perception of reality is colored by one's *personal constructs*—one's way of looking at, explaining, and interpreting events in one's world. In a similar manner, all people, in their quest for meaning, make observations, construe relationships among events, formulate theories, generate hypotheses, test those that are plausible, and reach conclusions from their experiments. A person's conclusions, like those of any scientist, are not fixed or final. They are open to reconsideration and reformulation.

B. Scientist as Person

If people can be seen as scientists, then scientists can also be seen as people. Therefore, the pronouncements of scientists should be regarded with the same skepticism with which people view any behavior. This approach, of course, means that Kelly's theory is not exempt from restructuring. Kelly (1969b) presented his theory as a set of half-truths and recognized the inaccuracy of its constructions. Like Carl Rogers, Kelly hoped that his

theory would be overthrown and replaced by a better one. Indeed, Kelly, more than any other personality theorist, formulated a theory that encourages its own demise.

C. Constructive Alternativism

Kelly began with the assumption that the universe really exists and that it functions as an integral unit, with all its parts interacting precisely with each other. Moreover, the universe is constantly changing, so something is happening all the time. In other words, people always have alternative ways of looking at things. Kelly (1963) assumed *"that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement"* (p. 15). He referred to this assumption as **constructive alternativism** and summed up the notion with these words: "The events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive" (Kelly, 1970, p. 1). The philosophy of constructive alternativism assumes that the piece-by-piece accumulation of facts does not add up to truth; rather, it assumes that facts can be looked at from different perspectives.

In contrast to Adler, however, Kelly stressed the notion that interpretations have meaning in the dimension of time, and what is valid at one time becomes false when construed differently at a later time. Kelly believed that the *person,* not the facts, holds the key to an individual's future. Facts and events do not dictate conclusions; rather, they carry meanings for people to discover.

IV. Personal Constructs

Kelly's philosophy assumes that people's interpretation of a unified, ever-changing world constitutes their reality. A personal construct is one's way of seeing how things (or people) are alike and yet different from other things (or people). Both the comparison and the contrast are essential. Whether they are clearly perceived or dimly felt, personal constructs shape an individual's behavior.

In much the same manner, all people attempt to validate their constructs. They look for better-fitting templates and thus try to improve their personal constructs. However, personal improvement is not inevitable, because the investment people make in their established constructs blocks the path of forward development.

A. Basic Postulate

Personal construct theory is expressed in one fundamental postulate, or assumption, and elaborated by means of 11 supporting corollaries. The basic postulate assumes that *"a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which [that person] anticipates events"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 46). In other words, people's behaviors (thoughts and actions) are directed by the way they see the future. This postulate is not intended as an absolute statement of truth but is a tentative assumption open to question and scientific testing.

Kelly (1955, 1970) clarified this fundamental assumption by defining its key terms. First, the phrase *person's processes* refers to a living, changing, moving human being. Kelly was not concerned here with animals, with society, or with any part or function of the person. He did not recognize motives, needs, drives, or instincts as forces underlying motivation. Life itself accounts for one's movement.

Kelly chose the term *channelized* to suggest that people move with a direction through a network of pathways or channels. The network, however, is flexible, both facilitating and restricting people's range of action. In addition, the term avoids the implication that some sort of energy is being transformed into action.

The next key phrase is *ways of anticipating events*, which suggests that people guide their actions according to their predictions of the future. Kelly (1955) said that people are tantalized not by their past but by their view of the future. People continuously "reach out to the future through the window of the present" (p. 49).

B. Supporting Corollaries

To elaborate his theory of personal constructs, Kelly proposed 11 supporting corollaries, all of which can be inferred from his basic postulate. No two events are exactly alike, they may be similar enough for people to construe them as the same event. Kelly (1955, 1970) referred to this similarity among events as the **construction corollary**.

The construction corollary states that *"a person anticipates events by construing their replications"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 50). Kelly's second corollary is equally obvious. *"Persons differ from each other in their construction of events"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 55). Kelly called this emphasis on individual differences the **individuality corollary**. Kelly's third corollary, the **organization corollary**, emphasizes relationships among constructs and states that people *"characteristically evolve, for [their] convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 56).

The **dichotomy corollary** states that *"a person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 59). If people construe events in dichotomized fashion, then it follows that they have some choice in following alternative courses of action. This is Kelly's **choice corollary**, paraphrased as follows: *People choose for themselves that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which they anticipate the greater possibility for extension and definition of future constructs*.

Kelly's **range corollary** assumes that personal constructs are finite and not relevant to everything. *"A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 68). In other words, a construct is limited to a particular *range of convenience*. The **experience corollary** states: *"A person's construction system varies as*

he [or she] successively construes the replications of events" (Kelly, 1955, p. 72).

Arlene's flexibility illustrates Kelly's **modulation corollary**. *"The variation in a person's construction system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose range of convenience the variants lie"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 77). It assumes that the extent to which people revise their constructs is related to the degree of **permeability** of their existing constructs. Although Kelly assumed an overall stability or consistency of a person's construction system, his **fragmentation corollary** allows for the incompatibility of specific elements. *"A person may successively employ a variety of constructive subsystems which are inferentially incompatible with each other"* (Kelly, 1955, p. 83).

Although Kelly's second supporting corollary assumes that people are different from each other, his **commonality corollary** assumes similarities among people. His slightly revised commonality corollary reads: *"To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, [that person's] processes are psychologically similar to those of the other person"* (Kelly, 1970, p. 20).

The final supporting corollary, the **sociality corollary** can be paraphrased to read as follows: *To the extent that people accurately construe the belief system of others, they may play a role in a social process involving those other people*. Kelly introduced the notion of **role** with his sociality corollary. A role refers to a pattern of behavior that results from a person's understanding of the constructs of others with whom that person is engaged in a task. Arlene's roles as student, employee, and daughter would be considered peripheral roles. More central to her existence would be her *core role*. With a **core role**, an individual defines himself or herself in terms of who he or she really is. It gives him or her a sense of identity and provides him or her with guidelines for everyday living.

V. Applications of Personal Construct Theory

Like most personality theorists, Kelly evolved his theoretical formulations from his practice as a psychotherapist. He spent more than 20 years conducting therapy before he published *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* in 1955.

A. Abnormal Development

In Kelly's view, psychologically healthy people validate their personal constructs against their experiences with the real world. They are like competent scientists who test reasonable hypotheses, accept the results without denial or distortion, and then willingly alter their theories to match available data. Healthy individuals not only anticipate events but are also able to make satisfactory adjustments when things do not turn out as they expected.

Unhealthy people, on the other hand, stubbornly cling to outdated personal constructs, fearing validation of any new constructs that would upset their present comfortable view of

the world. Such people are similar to incompetent scientists who test unreasonable hypotheses, reject or distort legitimate results, and refuse to amend or abandon old theories that are no longer useful. Kelly (1955) defined a disorder as *"any personal construction which is used repeatedly in spite of consistent invalidation"* (p. 831).

People experience **threat** when they perceive that the stability of their basic constructs is likely to be shaken. Kelly (1955) defined threat as *"the awareness of imminent comprehensive change in one's core structures"* (p. 489). By Kelly's definition, threat involves a *comprehensive* change in a person's core structures. **Fear**, on the other hand, is more *specific* and *incidental*. Kelly (1955) defined **anxiety** as *"the recognition that the events with which one is confronted lie outside the range of convenience of one's construct system"* (p. 495). Pathological anxiety exists when a person's incompatible constructs can no longer be tolerated and the person's construction system breaks down. However, if that core role is weakened or dissolved, a person will develop a feeling of guilt. Kelly (1970) defined **guilt** as *"the sense of having lost one's core role structure"* (p. 27).

B. Psychotherapy

Psychological distress exists whenever people have difficulty validating their personal constructs, anticipating future events, and controlling their present environment. When distress becomes unmanageable, they may seek outside help in the form of psychotherapy.

As a technique for altering the clients' constructs, Kelly used a procedure called *fixed-role therapy.* The purpose of fixed-role therapy is to help clients change their outlook on life (personal constructs) by acting out a predetermined role, first within the relative security of the therapeutic setting and then in the environment beyond therapy where they enact the role continuously over a period of several weeks. In fact, the fixed-role sketch is typically written in the third person, with the actor assuming a new identity. Fixed-role therapy is not aimed at solving specific problems or repairing obsolete constructs. It is a creative process that allows clients to gradually discover previously hidden aspects of themselves.

Prior to developing the fixed-role approach, Kelly (1969a) stumbled on an unusual procedure that strongly resembles fixed-role therapy. After becoming uncomfortable with Freudian techniques, he decided to offer his clients "preposterous interpretations" for their complaints. Some were far-fetched Freudian interpretations, but nevertheless, most clients accepted these "explanations" and used them as guides to future action.

C. The Rep Test

Another procedure used by Kelly, both inside and outside therapy, was the *Role Construct Repertory (Rep) Test.* The purpose of the Rep Test is to discover ways in which people construe significant people in their lives. With the Rep Test, a person is given a Role Title list and asked to designate people who fit the role titles by writing their names on a card. For example, for "a teacher you liked," the person must supply a particular name. The

major goal of the test involves developing the constructs a person has about the important people in their life by asking the person (rater) to choose any three people from the list at one time.

There are several versions of the Rep Test and the repertory grid, but all are designed to assess personal constructs. Kelly and his colleagues have used the Rep Test in a variety of forms, and no set scoring rules apply. Reliability and validity of the instrument are not very high, and its usefulness depends largely on the skill and experience of the examiner (Fransella & Bannister, 1977).

VI. Related Research

Even though George Kelly wrote only one seminal work (1955, 1991), his impact on personality psychology is remarkable. His personal construct theory has generated a sizable number of empirical investigations, including nearly 600 empirical studies on his repertory test, which suggests that his theory has fared quite well in generating research.

A. The Rep Test and Teens With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Research has shown that people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often have difficulties establishing and maintaining close personal relationships, which can lead to loneliness and depression (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). The adolescent years can be especially challenging for those with ASD. The very area of difference that those with ASD have—interpersonal interaction around emotions and feelings—limits the utility of interview-style research approaches that require them to engage in a conversation of this nature. This struck researchers Murphy, Burns, and Kilby (2017) as the perfect place to employ Kelly's personal construct theory methodologies to allow teens with ASD themselves to construe their close relationships on their own terms without extended conversation (and eye contact) with an interviewer. They recruited 13- to 18-year-olds with ASD or Asperger's syndrome and used a modified Rep Test technique that has been shown to work well with younger participants. Thematic analysis of the interviews resulted in four themes of importance to teens with ASD: relationships as a source of support, perceptions of similarity and difference, valued qualities in self and others, and the development and maintenance of relationships.

This research suggests that, in working to enhance ASD adolescents' relational skill set, enabling them to practice understanding and using humor might help lessen some of the difficulties these teens have in grasping the nuances of relationships and engender the core trust they desire to experience with friends. If that humor can be deployed to emphasize their uniqueness with a more positive and compassionate frame, then these individuals may come to experience themselves not as *disabled* but as differently, and even distinctively, *abled*.

B. Applying Personal Construct Theory to Intrapersonal Questions of Identity

Kelly's original Rep Test was designed to assess how individuals construe significant people in their lives. In this way, it serves as a test of interpersonal comparisons that reveal meaningful personal constructs, like those of the ASD teens in the previous section. Bonnie Moradi and colleagues have begun to use the Rep Test in an exciting new way to assess how individuals identify or disidentify with elements of them*selves*. That is, this research uses the Rep Test to examine intrapersonal questions of identity within individuals.

Perhaps the most insidious characteristic of being a person who belongs to a stigmatized group occurs when individuals in that group internalize the prejudice and think negatively of themselves. Moradi and colleagues (2009) offer suggestions for personal construct therapy interventions to specifically address threat and guilt in individuals with internalized prejudice.

Guilt reduction techniques would focus on replacing negative self-construals with more positive ones. Threat reduction might focus on enabling gay and lesbian clients to see that integrating being homosexual into their desired self-construal might not mean they must change who they are in fundamental ways.

A puzzling phenomenon in social justice research is the widespread tendency of many people to agree with feminist values but not to identify as feminists. Often this is referred to as the "I'm not a feminist but" phenomenon, wherein individuals deny feminist identification but follow up immediately with stated agreement with many specific feminist values such as the belief that men and women and boys and girls should have equal opportunities and choices (e.g., Zucker, 2004).

C. Personal Constructs and the Big Five

Researchers have investigated the connections between Kelly's personal constructs and the Big Five traits. The Big Five traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) have received a great deal of attention in modern personality research. Not all personality psychologists agree with this disproportionate allocation of research and the value of each approach. James Grice and colleagues, for example, have directly compared Kelly's personal construct theory with the Big Five (Grice, 2004; Grice, Jackson, & McDaniel, 2006).

The research by James Grice (Grice, 2004; Grice et al., 2006) essentially sought to determine just how good the repertory grid approach was at capturing uniqueness compared to the Big Five. To do this, Grice (2004) had participants complete a modified version of Kelly's repertory grid and a standard self-report measure of the Big Five. Participants rated both themselves and people they knew using the repertory grid and the Big Five measure. What they found was rather stunning: There was only about 50% overlap (Grice, 2004; Grice et al., 2006). This means that the repertory grid was capturing aspects of people the Big Five was not and that the Big Five was capturing aspects the

repertory grid was not.

VII. Critique of Kelly

Kelly's theory probably is most applicable to relatively normal, intelligent people. Unfortunately, it pays scant attention to problems of motivation, development influences, and cultural forces. On the six criteria of a useful theory, it rates very high on parsimony and internal consistency and about average on its ability to generate research. However, it rates low on its ability to be falsified, to guide the practitioner, and to organize knowledge.

VIII. Concept of Humanity

Kelly had an essentially *optimistic* view of human nature. He saw people as anticipating the future and living their lives in accordance with those anticipations. People are capable of changing their personal constructs at any time of life, but those changes are seldom easy.

On the dimension of *determinism versus free choice*, Kelly's theory leans toward free choice. Within one's own personal construct system, one is free to make a choice (Kelly, 1980). People choose between alternatives within a construct system that they themselves have built. Kelly referred to this view as the **elaborative choice**; that is, in making present choices, people look ahead and pick the alternative that will increase their range of future choices.

Kelly adopted a *teleological* as opposed to a causal view of human personality. He repeatedly insisted that childhood events per se do not shape current personality. Kelly emphasized *conscious processes* more than unconscious ones. However, he did not stress conscious *motivation* because motivation plays no part in personal construct theory. Experiences can be at low levels of awareness for several reasons. First, some constructs are preverbal because they were formed before a person acquired meaningful language, and hence, they are not capable of being symbolized even to oneself. Second, some experiences are at a low level of awareness because a person sees only similarities and fails to make meaningful contrasts.

On the issue of *biological versus social influences*, Kelly was inclined more toward the social. His sociality corollary assumes that, to some extent, people are influenced by others and, in turn, have some impact on them. On the final dimension for a conception of humanity—*uniqueness versus similarities*—Kelly emphasized the uniqueness of personality. This emphasis, however, was tempered by his commonality corollary, which assumes that people from the same sociocultural background tend to have had some of the same kinds of experience and, therefore, construe events similarly.