

Overview of the Personal Construction Theory

"Ultimately a man sets the measure of his own freedom and his own bondage by the level at which he chooses to establish his convictions."

Personal Construction Theory: A Quick Synopsis

The key message of the Personal Construction Theory is that the world is 'perceived' by a person in terms of whatever 'meaning' that person applies to it and the person has the *freedom to choose* a different 'meaning' of whatever he or she wants. In other words, as suggested by George Kelly, the original proponent of the theory, the person has the 'freedom to choose' the meaning that one prefers or likes. He called this *alternative constructivism*. In simple words, the person is capable of applying alternative constructions (meanings) to any events in the past, present or future. The person is not a prisoner of one's 'biography or past' and could liberate oneself from the misery of 'miserable' events if one desires by reconstruing (reinterpreting and redefining) them. The theory rejects the existing schism between affect, cognition, and action and recommends that they be construed together for developing a fuller understanding of human behavior.

The following excerpts from various sources provide some 'flavor' of PCT.

PCT attempts to explain "Why man does what he does" (Kelly 1955). It is a theory about "how the human process flows, how it strives in new directions as well as in old, and how it may dare for the first time to reach into the depths of newly perceived dimensions." (Kelly cited in Fransella 1995).

"The person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipate events". The subject is the *process*... the individual is essentially a behaving organism and doesn't need an external 'push' or 'pull' to get into motion. The processes include those of our self-definition and our relationships with others, as well as the tasks at hand (Kelly 1955).

George Kelly, the original proponent of PCT suggested that PCT is based on the model of *man-the-scientist* (1955). Within this model,

- the individual creates his or her own ways of seeing the world in which he lives; the world does not create them for him;
- (s)he builds *constructs* and tries them on for size;
- the constructs are sometimes organized into systems, group of constructs which embody subordinate and superordinate relationships;
- the same events can often be viewed in the light of two or more systems, yet the events do not belong to any system; and
- the individual's practical systems have particular foci and limited ranges of convenience.

Constructs are "transparent patterns or templets which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed... Patterns that are tentatively tried for size... Ways of construing the world... Constructs are used for prediction of things to come, and the world keeps rolling along

and revealing these predictions to be either correct or misleading. This fact provides the basis for revision of constructs and, eventually, of whole construction systems."

Kelly suggested that the PCT was based on the philosophy of *constructive alternativism*: "We assume that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement... There are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world." Bannister (1981) later noted that: "Constructive alternativism argues for an open society in which the pursuit of alternatives is central to the way in which we live. Political doctrines favoring authoritarian forms of social structure require the acceptance of indisputable truths, indisputable 'realities.'"

Kelly's observation about determinism and man's free will is summed up in his following words: "He is not the victim of the pie, but of his notions of etiquette under which the pie cutting has been subsumed.... Man, to the extent that he is able to construe his circumstances, can find for himself freedom from their domination... Man can also enslave himself with his own ideas and then win his freedom by reconstruing his life. Ultimately a man sets the measure of his own freedom and his own bondage by the level at which he chooses to establish his convictions."

PCT doesn't ignore the relevance of the social context and the constraints imposed by it on personal construction: "But to believe that man is the author of his destiny is not to deny that he may be tragically limited by circumstances. I saw too many unfortunate youngsters, some of them literally starving in that depression-ridden dust bowl, for me not to be aware of their tragic limitations. Clearly there were many things they might have liked to do that circumstances would not permit. But, nevertheless, this is not to say that they were victims of circumstances. However, much there was denied them there was still an infinity of possibilities open to them. The task was to generate the imagination needed to envision those possibilities" (cited in Fransella 1995).

The contrast between the individual reality, social reality and shared reality is implied in the following distinctions noted by Kelly.

Individuality: "persons differ from each other in their construction of events."

Communality: "to the extent one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person."

Sociality: "to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person."

Over the last 40 years, the theory has found its home in the areas of artificial intelligence, education, human computer interaction, and human learning, and is gradually gaining ground in the sociological disciplines. Of particular interest is the emphasis of the theory that *communality* (the social reality) and

individuality (the personal reality) need to be considered together for developing an understanding of the psychological processes.