Point of view

Is George Kelly's constructs system (Loosening – Tightening) related to his perspective in Psychotherapy?

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Abstract

George Kelly developed a theoretical position which is extended from ontological and epistemological arguments to practical applications in psychotherapy [1;2;3;4]. He presents and elaborates his position at all levels of theoretical discourse in his two volume book, "The Psychology of Personal Constructs". He calls his philosophical position "Constructive Alternativism". The personality theory he formulated is called "Personal Construct Theory". The most popular part of his work is the technique he developed for elicitation of personal constructs, which is called the "Repertory Grid Technique".

Kelly rejects the notion that human psychology can be divided into separate realms. He suggests that personal construct psychology covers both consciousness and unconsciousness. Moreover, he rejects the classical tricotomy of psychology, that is cognition (intellect), affection (emotion) and conation (action). Although his theory is considered by some others as being in the realm of cognitive psychology but he does not accept that, and consider his theory as a theory of personality which is a whole.

Indeed, Kelly suggests that there are sub-systems in a person's psychological space. These sub-systems can be relatively autonomous from each other as the fragmentation corollary suggests. They also evolve through experience as the experience corollary suggests.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Gorge Kelly's theoretical perspective, especially his constructs system (Loosening – Tightening). The article begins with an outline of Kelly's perspective, and then it discusses constructive alternatives and the loosening – tightening system.

George Kelly's Theoretical Perspective

Kelly's theoretical position has some uniqueness, and its relations with other philosophical positions and psychological theories have been subjects of controversy. However, it should be noted that Kelly's Repertory Grid Technique has been used widely not only by the followers of his theoretical line, but also many others who ignore his theory [5]. It appears that the Repertory Grid Technique is separable from its theoretical roots. This

is conceivable, because it provides highly sophisticated mathematical and statistical tools that are attractive even for those who do not understand or do not care to consider Kelly's theoretical position. These tools can be particularly attractive for statistically inclined behaviourists [6].

On the other hand, there are some theoretical arguments against taking his theory seriously. [7,8,9] argued that Kelly did not recognise his theoretical ancestry in psychology e.g. Lewin, Piaget, Allport, Werner and Sullivan who were theoretically on his side. Therefore, he hardly deserves consideration for his theoretical work. [10,11] argues that the widespread disregard of his philosophy and theory in the literature is because of its inherent weaknesses. Moreover, he also demonstrates that Kelly's self positioning vis-a-vis Existentialism, phenomenology and Marxism was based on the stereotyped American view of these philosophies.

Although I tend to agree with Holland [10]. That Kelly's evaluations of other philosophical positions are stereotypical ones, and in that sense his philosophy is weak, I do not think that his whole philosophy and theory can be labelled inherently weak. There are two crucial points to be considered when evaluating Kelly's philosophy. First, he tries to formulate his position in the context of his contemporaneous theories, particularly behaviourism in psychology. As Warren[12] argues , Kelly's philosophical position is at odds with the philosophies of his time, and it is better alignable with the contemporary developments in philosophy. This created some difficulties for Kelly in articulating his theory. Second, Kelly formulates his position in such a way that it is consistent with the main argument of his philosophy. He formulates his philosophy in a loose way. He thinks that the loosening of a person's construct system is a necessary component of creativity[6]. He also theorises that any theoretical construct is subject to change, and makes his theory amenable to such a change. As [11] suggests that George Kelly invites us to go beyond him in one of retrospective evaluations of his position. Kelly states, "Indeed our theory is frankly designed to contribute effectively to its own eventual overthrow and displacement" [13].

I am arguing for an elaboration of Kelly's philosophy and theory, not because I completely agree with him, nor that I think his position from the philosophical to operational is consistent throughout. However, there is an important premise of his approach that I totally agree with that any scientific inquiry (perspective, theory, research and etc.) should be conducted with the awareness that it is operating at all levels of knowledge process, and the inquirer should try to raise this to his

consciousness and try to be consistent at all levels. This is the message of Kelly's Personal Construct Theory.

Constructive Alternativism

Kelly[14] declares himself as being "against realism". Indeed, this self-positioning is questionable. His self – declared position vis-à-vis phenomenology is not a clear one either. He both criticises phenomenology [13] , and says that his position is a combination of the "neo–phenomenological approaches" and more conventional methodology.

According to Kelly [3, 14,15,16,17,] the universe (physical reality) exists. Is the reality of nature independent from man's knowledge of it? Is this reality orderly and lawful? He accepts the existence of reality independent from its knowledge. However, he tends to argue against the self-orderliness and self-lawfulness of the universe. He says that the universe is essentially active and ever changing [1, 18.] The reality of the universe is not divided into independent events, it is an essential continuity. Kelly aligns himself with Heraclitus's notion of an active universe and argues against Aristotle for putting science in pigeonholes (i.e., construing reality as discrete events of phenomena). One following argument is that since reality is not discrete or composed of independent events, lawfulness and determinism are not essential to the analogy of the universe. Lawfulness and determinism are defined by mainstream science as observed repetitions in

phenomena. However, no event actually doubles back on itself. Therefore, concretely, the new events are unique; it is only by abstracting them that a person finds what is replicated. In other words, repetition is nothing but a construct. Then why does man use this construct called "repetition"? Because, it is convenient and gives man a capacity to manage his world. Man has gained this construct through his experience.

One can argue that Kelly's position on the existence of the universe is a contradictory one. It can be said that the argument against the existence of discrete events or phenomena and the notion that orderliness and repetitions are nothing but construct, eventually boil down to the rejection of an independent existence of reality. On the other hand, Kelly says that he accepts the existence of reality, and recognises the manageability of reality. How would reality be manageable if repetition and orderliness were mere constructs? How could those mental tools (constructs) be of use if they did not correspond to anything? However, he does not answer these questions.

They are difficulties in Kelly's ontological position. However, it should be kept in mind that he was in a dialogue with the positivist behaviourists of this time. As Warren and others [12; 6;19]; remind us, Kelly was at odds with these theories. However, he could not develop

a sound alternative to them. I think Kelly's arguments will become more meaningful and consistent in themselves if they are related to the ontological implications of the chaos perspective.

Kelly argues against putting science in pigeonholes, which is an approach based on the assumption that the events in the external reality are discrete. His position contrary to this is that reality is an essential continuity. He is against the notion of orderliness and lawfulness of phenomena, because he is in a dialogue with naïve realism, which argues that there are iron laws in reality which are expressed in linear causalities. Those linear causalities were supposed to assure perfect predictability. Kelly was not comfortable with such a deterministic notion of science. Chaos changes the meaning of orderliness and predictability and suggests that most natural phenomena are non-linear and only partially predictable. Kelly would have been more comfortable with this notion of orderliness and predictability. He also would have found compatibility between his notion of essentially active and ever-changing universe and these ontological implications of Chaos.

According to [21], who is one of the most prominent developers of the personal construct theory after Kelly, the persistent dialectic between a man who engages in intentional action, yet whose behaviour is lawfully locked into an

integral universe permeates construct theory. This tension can be observed, sometimes, in the form of contradictions in Kelly's notion of personal constructs and their relations to reality and his self-positioning vis-à-vis phenomenology and Existentialism.

According to Kelly, "the universe is existing and man is coming to know it" [1, p.170]. However, knowing is not simply a reflection of reality on the human mind." The universe is real, but is not inexorable unless man chooses to construct it that way" [1, p8]. In the knowing process, man is a proactive being.

However, in the process of man's relationship with reality, Kelly argues that constructions of those realities by man play an important role. Man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templates which Kelly calls constructs. Man creates his own ways of seeing the world by imposing structure on it. Obviously, for Kelly, the superordinating view of the theorist, not the information coming from reality, determines the nature of constructing. Therefore, reality is subject to many alternative constructions. However, among the various ways in which the world is construed, some of them are undoubtedly better than others. The question of which can be better determined by testing them in terms of their predictive efficiencies.

These points may seem to contradict each other.Oliver[22], however, does not see a contradiction in his interpretations of Kelly's philosophy." Reality has that much structure enough to exclude some perceptions or interpretations of it, but it is tolerant of variety of construal and an individual in constructing freshly is exhibiting his creativity" [22,p.188]. Kelly places special emphasis on man responsibility in the creation of constructs. In fact, his usage of the word construct has a special meaning. He deliberately does not use the word concept because a concept it too likely to be presumed a latent category of nature – something for man's diligence to discover rather than for his ingenuity to contrive [13]. As Holland and Landfield [10;23], Suggests, Kelly's clear distinction between concept and construct introduces the criterion of responsibility. We are responsible for our constructing, since this is the formative structure of our choosing. This is a notion; Holland argues that Kelly shares with Existentialists. Holland sees Kelly's criticism of phenomenology as a result of his not knowing much about European phenomenology and existentialism, and he argues that Kelly was a naïve existentialist. However, Holland suggests that there are two similarities between Kelly's and Existentialism; Kelly's attitude toward labels in general, and the importance he gives to a person's unique structuring of the world by impressing upon it.

A basic problem with Kelly's philosophy is, as Holland points out, his conception of man as a utopian creature, an abstract, a historic being. In his writings, it never becomes clear whether he means an individual man or a species. As Holland points out, there is no place for social forces in Kelly's philosophy and theory . Although the change, action and flow of universe are basic postulates in his philosophy, he does not mention any concrete history. In fact, he admits that his theory is historical.

This is understandable when his primary emphasis on the individual person and his construction is considered. Any mentioning of history and society would be recognition of constraints imposed upon the individual and a possibility of construction being determined by some external forces. That would not have been Kelly's position. However, Kelly does not close the door to effects of social processes in the constructing process. He states that the construction systems of an individual person can be communicated and widely shared.

The Fundamental Postulate and Its Corollaries

Kelly formulated his personal construct theory as a fundamental postulate and its eleven corollaries. Kelly's fundamental postulate says "A person's processes are psychologically channelled by the ways

he anticipates events" [1,p.46]. We can see the two key notions of Kelly's philosophy in the fundamental postulate: individual responsibility and change. However, by person, Kelly means individual person. This abstract individual person is at the core of his theory. He does not see the person as an object that is temporarily in a moving state, but rather as a form of motion. By "channelled", he means a network of pathways which both facilitate and restricts a person range of psychological action. First of all, these pathways guide a person's interpretation of external realities. His construction corollary says: "A person anticipates events by constructing their replications"[1,p.50]. These replications are the bases for predictions. Once events have been given beginning and endings, and their similarities and contrasts construed, it becomes feasible to try to predict them.

There are two instruments used in the construing process, construct and elements. A construct is a bipolar dimension (e.g. good – bad, inclined – not inclined, etc). Constructs are reference frames, templates through which a person sees the continuous reality and brackets it, frames it. Constructs are abstractions of reality. Elements are more concrete; they can be placed on construct dimensions. "Elements are things or events which are abstracted by a construct" [1, p.137]. Thus,

elements are constructs themselves; being an element of another construct, they are also abstractions, but abstractions of a lesser degree.

Characterisation of Construction System

In Kelly's theory, constructs are not independent dimensions. They are related to each other, and constitute a whole, which is the person's construction system [14;15;16;24;18]. His organisation corollary says, "Each person characteristically evolves for his convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationship between constructs" [1,p.56].

The first important point here is that constructs of a person are organised, that is they are related to each other in a relatively stable set of relationships. This corollary suggests more than systemic relationships. It also says that there is a hierarchical relationship among constructs. Some constructs are superordinate in this systemic hierarchy, whereas others are subordinate. Kelly also uses the analogy of centrality of constructs and considers superordinate constructs as more central to the construction system of the person.

According to Kelly, a person is in need of setting up a consistent hierarchy of constructs. However, this is not for consistency's sake, unlike [25], the notion of an inherent tendency toward cognitive consonance. It is rather "to anticipate the

whole world of events and thus relate himself to them that best explains his psychological processes. If he acts to preserve the system, it is because the system in an essential chart for his personal adventures, not because it is a self–contained island of meaning in an ocean of inconsequentiality" [1,p.59].

A person's construction system is a dynamic one; it changes as the person construes his experiences. The experience corollary suggests: "A person's construction system varies as he successively construes the replication of events" [1,p.72]. Personal constructs change as one continues having experience. This implies an interaction with the environment. However, that does not mean simple reflection of external reality into a person's construct system .A person has an active role in the change of his constructs.

This corollary countervails the organisation corollary. It leaves open the possibility of inconsistencies in a person's construct system. However, according to Kelly, what one man sees as inconsistent another may see as consistent; consistency is a construct, and a personal one.

Loosening – Tightening Construct
Complexity and differentiation of a personal construct system are not stable states. The construct system changes as a person interacts with his environment. One of the dimensions of change is

loosening and tightening of constructs. Loosening is defined as characteristic of those constructs leading to varying predictions, while a tight construct holds its elements firmly in their prescribed constructs. Under loose construction, an element classifies at one pole of a construct on one occasion is envisioned at the contrast pole on the other. Thus a loose construct tends to be elastic, relating itself to its elements only tenuously; yet it retains its identity as a personal construct in the clients' system." [1, pp.1020-1030]. This definition by Kelly makes it looks as if loosening and tightening refer the relationship between a construct and its elements. However, some other parts of Kelly's works can be interpreted to mean that loosening and tightening define the relationship between the constructs. Thus, it can be said that Kelly did not make him clear on this issue. His followers picked up the issue and usually suggested that both the construct–element and construct–construct relationship are subject to loosening and tightening. However, both elements would be abstractions at varying degrees. Such a conceptualisation renders the distinction between element– construct and construct–construct relationships obsolete. Conceptualisation of both element and construct as forms of abstraction also will be more meaningful in the context of Kelly's

conceptualisation that a construct system is a whole. In his system of construct and element, we can talk about the loosening and tightening of the relationship among theses components (i.e. elements and constructs).

However, when does loosening occur? [26], Suggests that cognitive complexity or simplicity has something to do with a person's ability to loosen his construction system. A person with relatively monolithic conceptual structures will tend to resist change in the face of ambiguity in order to avoid further confusion and anxiety. Even minor change in a tightly organised construct system can present a prospect of impending chaos. On the other hand, the explanation of Bannister etal [27], is that a person loosens his construction of events in the face of repeated predictive failure. He calls this phenomenon, serial invalidation. A person loosens the relationships between his constructs in order to minimise the reverbatory impact of further invalidation. Although this loosening of construct relationships is presumably undertaken to conserve the system, progressive loosening, without corresponding integration, eventually would lead to the collapse of the entire conceptual structure. The corresponding integration process is what Kelly calls "tightening" [14;15;16;17].

However, according to Kelly, in the loosening phase, a person may recall some events neglected before; new elements come into his field of attention. This makes constructs more permeable, i.e. more ready to change through accepting new elements on their dimensions. A person may shuffle some ideas into new combinations. Tightening, on the other hand, stabilises construction and facilitates the organisation of the ordinal relationship in a construct system. In other words, both the reconstruction of reality in a person's mind and his preferences pertinent to that reality becomes clear in the tightening process.

Kelly defines another cycle in the constructing process. That is the "Circumspection Pre-emption Control Cycle" and he calls the first cycle, the creativity cycle, which starts with loose construction rather than prepositional construction. In that case, there is a single construct shaping up. In the proposition phase of the Circumspection Preemption Control Cycle, however, this may be an array of constructs.

It is arguable that Kelly's concept - ualisation of two separate cycles is justified and related in his perspective because his distinction is based on his element construct differentiation, which he did not explain very well. But [21], dissolved this unnecessary distinction between element and constructs[28], does not agree with Kelly's differentiation between the two cycles, and sees the

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phases of Circumspection Preemption Control Cycle as more elaborate forms of loosening and tightening.

I agree with Bannister's view that because constructs are essentially personal, there are some constructs or some areas of construction which are shared with others. Loosening occurs due to the need for validation of construction, and validation can take place in a social context.If this validation is in relation to the constructions of others, then we may see this cycle as one of creating shared meaning.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to outline Kelly's perspective and his technique (loosening – tightening) constructs and to consider whether Kelly's constructs system is consistent with his philosophy and ideas about a person. It is not my aim to prove those techniques, but rather to focus in Kelly's Perspective. It has been shown, however, that despite the ambiguities and lack of clarity in Kelly's system, it is consistent with his theoretical perspective.

As a psychotherapist I believe that the constructs system has a complexity which has not been resolved. However, even with this complexity, a person may be capable of constricting broader as - pects of reality and reconstructing concrete reality in more creative ways. Indeed, I do not think that Kelly is very well in explanation about the system of loosening–tightening constructs, or his distinction between the two parts of his system and another system which he called "the Circumspection Preemption Control Cycle". Moreover, the users have not taken Kelly's theory very seriously. More importantly, the loose construction of the theory did not appear to be a strong alternative to behaviourism, even among the followers of Kelly.

ملخص

يعتبر التطور التاريخي و الرئيسي للعلاج البنائي كان نفس علم نفس **personal construct psychology** الذي وضعه أصلاً جورج كيلي **G. Kelly** (*1955*) وطوره بعد ذلك بانيستر، فرانسيلا وزملائهم. حيث تقترح هذه النظرية أن الأشخاص البناءات الشخصية يفهمون أو "يؤولون"، العالم من خلال أنظمة البناءات الشخصية. على سبيل المثال هناك نموذج على البناء الشخصي هو "ودود– غير ودود". ذلك البناء يُمكّن الشخص من التمييز بين الأشخاص الذين يتم إدراكهم "كودودين" وأولئك "غير الوديين فهو سيتصرف بشكل مختلف تجاه شخص مؤول على أنه "ودود" وتجاه شخص "غير ودود" ويتجسد البناء داخل نظام اعتقادي خاص بالفرد ، فكل بناء لديه مداه الخاص من الملائمة. وقد ابتكر كيلي وزملائه تقنية عُرفت باسم "شبكة ذخيرة المعلومات

repertory grid لتقييم البناء الفريد ومحتوى أنظمة البناء الخاصة بالأفراد ، كما وضع عدد من الفنيات الفلسفية والنظرية لتطبيق مبادئ البناءات الشخصية في الممارسة العلاجية الاكلينيكة النفسية والتي اشتهرت باسم التنافر والترابط البنائي المعرفي **Tightening system – Loosening** ، حيث يُطلب من العملاء أن يصفوا أنفسهم كما هي، ومن ثم يبتكروا وصف لدور بديل اعتماداً على مجموعة مختلفة من البناءات حيث يتم تشجيعهم ليقوموا بهذا الدور لفترات محددة.

وقد ذكر كيلي (*1950*)ان البنائية تتسم بأنها تعتمد على ثلاثة افتراضات أساسية أولاً، يُعتبر الفرد عارف نشط **active knower**، أنه منخرط بشكل هادف في فهم عالمه. ثانياً، تعمل اللغة كوسيلة أولية من خلالها يبني الشخص فهمه للعالم. ولهذا يهتم المعالجين البنائيين على وجه التحديد بالمنتجات اللغوية مثل القصص والاستعارات، التي تُرى كطرق لبناء الخبرة. ثالثاً، هناك بُعد تنموي لقدرة الفرد على بناء عالمه. هذه الافتراضات الرئيسية الثلاثة تميز اختلاف ذو دلالة بين العلاج المعرفي والعلاج السلوكي المعرفي القدامى وبين البديل البنائي الأحدث، وقد قدم كيلي أفكاره كنظرية رسمية، مع فرضيات ونتائج طبيعية. أهم هذه العبارات كانت فرضيته الأساسية أن عمليات الشخص المعرفية تُوجه من خلال الطريقة التي يتوقع بها الأحداث من خلال النظام البنائي المعرفي الخاص به. ويحاول الباحث من خلال هذا البحث أن يلقى الضوء على التصور العلاجي البنائي لجورج كيلي ومن ثم التعرف على مدى ملائمة أشهر الاستراتيجيات والفنيات العلاجية في نظرية البناء المعرفي للفرد والتي أطلق عليها كيلي اسم ، والتي يستخدمها العديد من المعالجين النفسيين في الوقت الحاضر. ومدى الفاعلية التطبيقية لهذه الاستراتيجيات لدى المعالجين النفسين والأطباء. وقد خرج الباحث بتصور إن العلاج النفسي البنائي لجورج كيلي ليس من الممكن تطبيق استراتيجيات الترابط وعدم الترابط المعرفي للفرد كوسيلة تطبيقية علاجية ذات جدوى وفاعلية والسبب ان العلاج البنائي يرتبط ويرتكز على أسس فلسفية بحتة بدلا من استراتيجيات قابلة للتطبيق خلال الجلسة العلاجية النفسية.

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