

chapter 11

George Kelly: Personal Construct Theory



Fair Use

It occurred to me that what seemed true of myself was probably no less true of others. If I initiated my actions, so did they.

—George Kelly

The Cognitive Movement in Psychology

The Life of Kelly (1905–1967)

An Intellectual Approach to Counseling

Personal Construct Theory

Ways of Anticipating Life Events

The Construction Corollary

The Individuality Corollary

The Organization Corollary

The Dichotomy Corollary

The Choice Corollary

The Range Corollary

The Experience Corollary

The Modulation Corollary

The Fragmentation Corollary

The Commonality Corollary

The Sociality Corollary

Questions about Human Nature

Assessment in Kelly's Theory

The Interview

Self-Characterization Sketches

The Role Construct Repertory Test

Fixed Role Therapy

Research on Kelly's Theory

Cognitive Complexity and Cognitive Simplicity

Reflections on Kelly's Theory

Chapter Summary

Review Questions

Suggested Readings

The Cognitive Movement in Psychology

Kelly's **personal construct theory** of personality differs greatly from other approaches discussed in this book. Kelly warned us we would not find in his system such familiar concepts as the unconscious, the ego, needs, drives, stimuli and responses, and reinforcement—not even motivation and emotion. The obvious question is how can we understand the human personality without considering these ideas, especially motivation and emotion?

Kelly's answer was that each person creates a set of cognitive constructs about the environment. By that he meant that we interpret and organize the events and social relationships of our lives in a system or pattern. On the basis of this pattern, we make predictions about ourselves and about other people and events, and we use these predictions to formulate our responses and guide our actions. Therefore, to understand personality, we must first understand our patterns, the ways we organize or construct our world. According to Kelly, our interpretation of events is more important than the events themselves.

Like Maslow, Kelly was opposed to the behavioral and the psychoanalytic approaches to the study of personality. He viewed them both as denying the human ability to take charge of our lives, to make our own decisions, and to pursue our chosen course of action. He argued that behaviorism viewed people as merely passive responders to events

personal construct theory Kelly's description of personality in terms of cognitive processes: We are capable of interpreting behaviors and events and of using this understanding to guide our behavior and to predict the behavior of other people.

in their environment, and that psychoanalysis viewed people as passive responders to their unconscious forces. In contrast, "for Kelly, [people] are forms of motion and we propel ourselves. No one or no thing does it to us" (Fransella & Neimeyer, 2003, p. 25).

The personality theory Kelly offered derived from his experience as a clinician. For several reasons, he interpreted his clinical experience differently from Freud and other theorists who treated patients. The model of human nature Kelly developed from his clinical work is unusual. He concluded that people function in the same way scientists do.

Scientists construct theories and hypotheses and test them against reality by performing experiments in the laboratory. If the results of their experiments support the theory, the theory is retained. If the data do not support the theory, the theory must be rejected or modified and retested.

As we have seen, this is how psychologists who study personality typically proceed. Yet Kelly noted that psychologists do not attribute to their subjects the same intellectual and rational abilities they ascribe to themselves. It is as if psychologists have two theories about human nature, one that applies to scientists and their way of looking at the world, and another that applies to everybody else. The logical assumption, then, is that psychologists view their subjects as incapable of rational functioning, as being motivated by all sorts of conflicting drives, or as victims of rampant unconscious forces. Thus, human beings are believed to function largely on an emotional level, unlikely to use their cognitive processes to learn, think, evaluate experiences, or solve problems. Surely this is quite unlike the way psychologists function.

Are psychologists really superior beings? Kelly said they are no different from the people they study. What works for one works for the other; what explains one explains the other. Both are concerned with predicting and controlling the events in their lives, and both are capable of doing so rationally. Like scientists, all of us construct theories, which Kelly called *personal constructs*, by which we try to predict and control the events in our lives. He proposed that the way to understand someone's personality is to examine his or her personal constructs.

How does Kelly's cognitive theory fit with the cognitive movement that began around 1960 and now dominates mainstream experimental psychology? Despite the similarity in terminology, the cognitive movement has not embraced Kelly's work because the theory is not consistent with the movement's subject matter and methods.

Kelly's approach is that of a clinician dealing with the conscious constructs by which people arrange their lives. In contrast, cognitive psychologists are interested in both cognitive variables and overt behavior, which they study primarily in an experimental, not a clinical, setting. Also, cognitive psychologists do not limit their focus to personality. They study overt behavior and learning in social situations. They believe that cognitive processes such as learning influence a person's response to a given stimulus situation.

Although cognitive psychology took hold some time after Kelly proposed his explanation of personality, his theory had little influence on it. At best, Kelly's theory could be considered a precursor to contemporary cognitive psychology. The two approaches share the term *cognitive*, with its implied interest in conscious activities, but little else. Kelly's recognition of the importance of cognitive processes is noteworthy, but we must place it in perspective. It is not part of mainstream American psychology as defined by experimental psychologists, but that does not detract from its usefulness for studying personality.

The Life of Kelly (1905–1967)

Kelly was born on a farm in Kansas. An only child, he received a great deal of attention and affection from his parents, who were fundamentalist in their religious beliefs and committed to helping the less fortunate. They opposed frivolous entertainment such as

dancing and card playing. When Kelly was 4 years old, the family traveled by covered wagon to Colorado to try farming there but soon returned to Kansas. Kelly's early education was erratic and conducted as much by his parents as by schoolteachers. At 13, he went to high school in Wichita and seldom lived at home after that. In 1926, he earned a bachelor's degree in physics and mathematics from Park College in Parkville, Missouri. But his interests had shifted from science to social problems. Kelly's future was uncertain.

He worked briefly as an engineer, and then took a teaching job at a labor college in Minneapolis. Next, he became an instructor in speech for the American Banking Association and also taught citizenship courses to immigrants. He then enrolled in graduate school and received a master's degree in educational sociology from the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Accepting a job offer from a junior college in Iowa, Kelly taught various courses and coached the drama program. His career certainly showed no inclination toward psychology. In college, he had not been impressed by the coursework in the field.

In the first course in psychology, I sat in the back row of a very large class, tilted my chair against the wall, made myself as comfortable as possible, and kept one ear cocked for anything interesting that might turn up. One day the professor, a very nice person who seemed to be trying hard to convince himself that psychology was something to be taken seriously, turned to the blackboard and wrote an "S," an arrow, and an "R." Thereupon I straightened up in my chair and listened, thinking to myself that now, after two or three weeks of preliminaries, we might be getting to the meat of the matter. (Kelly, 1969, p. 46)

Kelly paid attention for several more class meetings and then gave up. He did not comprehend what the arrow connecting the stimulus (S) and the response (R) stood for. He never did figure it out. The traditional behaviorist, experimental approach to psychology had failed to spark his interest. He also explored psychoanalysis. He wrote, "I don't remember which one of Freud's books I was trying to read, but I do remember the mounting feeling of incredulity that anyone could write such nonsense, much less publish it" (1969, p. 47).

Kelly's professional training took a different turn in 1929 when he was awarded a fellowship at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. During his year there, he earned a Bachelor of Education degree and developed an interest in psychology. He returned to the United States for doctoral studies at the State University of Iowa and received his Ph.D. in 1931.

An Intellectual Approach to Counseling

Kelly began his academic career at Fort Hays Kansas State College in the midst of the economic depression of the 1930s. There was little opportunity to conduct research in physiological psychology, the specialty in which he had trained, so he switched to clinical psychology for which there was a need. He developed a clinical psychology service for the local public school system and for the students at his college. He established traveling clinics, going from school to school, which gave him the opportunity to deal with a variety of problems and to try different approaches to treatment.

Kelly was not committed to any particular therapeutic technique or to a specific theory about the nature of personality. He felt free to use traditional methods of assessment and treatment as well as those of his own design. His clinical experiences strongly influenced the nature of his personal construct theory. The people he treated were not severely disturbed psychotics in mental hospitals or neurotics with troublesome emotional problems. His patients were students who had been referred by their teachers for counseling.

Thus, unlike the emotionally maladjusted patients in a psychiatric ward or a psychoanalyst's office, Kelly's clients were much more capable of discussing their concerns rationally, of expressing their problems in intellectual terms, the level of functioning expected in an academic setting. In the classroom, we are taught to analyze, to think and process information logically. This intellectual attitude carried over from the classroom to the counseling situation. Had circumstances placed Kelly during his formative professional years at work with schizophrenics in a mental institution, his theory might not have depended so heavily on cognitive information-processing abilities.

World War II interrupted Kelly's academic career. He joined the U.S. Navy and served as a psychologist in the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in Washington DC. When the war ended in 1945, he taught for a year at the University of Maryland before joining the faculty of Ohio State University. There he spent 19 years teaching, refining his personality theory, and conducting research. Kelly also lectured at universities throughout the world about how his personal construct theory of personality could be used to resolve international tensions. In 1965, he accepted an invitation from Abraham Maslow for an appointment to an endowed chair at Brandeis University but Kelly died shortly thereafter.

Kelly was a major force in the development of the clinical psychology profession during its rapid growth following World War II. He held several honored positions in the field, including the presidencies of the Clinical and Consulting divisions of the American Psychological Association and the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology.

Log On

The Life and Work of George Kelly

A brief biography of Kelly's life, a bibliography of his works, and links to related sources.

George Kelly: Theory and Therapy

Information on Kelly's life and an extensive discussion of his theory and unique approach to therapy.

Personal Construct Theory

Kelly suggested that people perceive and organize their world of experiences the same way scientists do, by formulating hypotheses about the environment and testing them against the reality of daily life. In other words, we observe the events of our life—the facts or data of our experience—and interpret them in our own way. This personal interpreting, explaining, or *construing* of experience is our unique view of events. It is the pattern within which we place them. Kelly said that we look at the world through “transparent patterns that fit over the realities of which the world is composed” (Kelly, 1955, pp. 8–9).

We might compare these patterns to sunglasses that add a particular tint or coloring to everything we see. One person's glasses may have a bluish tint whereas another's may have a greenish tint. Several people can look at the same scene and perceive it differently, depending on the tint of the lenses that frame their point of view. So it is with the hypotheses or patterns we construct to make sense of our world. This special view, the unique pattern created by each individual, is what Kelly called our *construct system*.

construct An intellectual hypothesis that we devise and use to interpret or explain life events. Constructs are bipolar, or dichotomous, such as tall versus short or honest versus dishonest.

A **construct** is a person's unique way of looking at life, an intellectual hypothesis devised to explain or interpret events. We behave in accordance with the expectation that our constructs will predict and explain the reality of our world. Like scientists, we constantly test these hypotheses. We base our behavior on our constructs, and we evaluate the effects.

Consider a student who is in danger of failing an introductory psychology course and is trying to persuade the professor to give a passing grade. After observing the professor in a superior and authoritarian manner in class and has an inflated sense of personal importance. From this observation, the student forms the hypothesis, or construct, that acting to reinforce the professor's exaggerated self-image will bring a favorable response.

The student tests this idea against reality. The student reads an article the professor has written and praises it to the professor. If the professor feels flattered and gives the student a good grade, then the student's construct has been confirmed. It has been found to be useful and can be applied the next time the student takes a course with that professor or with any professor who behaves similarly. However, if the student receives a failing grade, then the construct was found to be inappropriate. A new one will be required for dealing with that professor.

Over the course of life, we develop many constructs, one for almost every type of person or situation we encounter. We expand our inventory of constructs as we meet new people and face new situations. Further, we may alter or discard constructs periodically as situations change. Revising our constructs is a necessary and continuous process; we must always have an alternative construct to apply to a situation. If our constructs were inflexible and incapable of being revised (which is what would happen if personality was totally determined by childhood influences), then we would not be able to cope with new situations. Kelly called this adaptability **constructive alternativism** to express the view that we are not controlled by our constructs but we are free to revise or replace them with other alternatives.

constructive alternativism The idea that we are free to revise or replace our constructs with alternatives as needed.

Ways of Anticipating Life Events

Kelly's personal construct theory is presented in a scientific format, organized into a fundamental postulate and 11 corollaries (see Table 11-1). The fundamental postulate states that *our psychological processes are directed by the ways in which we anticipate events*.

By using the word *processes*, Kelly was not suggesting some kind of internal mental energy. Rather, he believed that personality was a flowing, moving process. Our psychological processes are directed by our constructs, by the way each of us construes our world. Another key word in the fundamental postulate is *anticipate*. Kelly's notion of constructs is anticipatory. We use constructs to predict the future so that we have some idea of the consequences of our actions, of what is likely to occur if we behave in a certain way.

The Construction Corollary

Similarities among repeated events Kelly believed no life event or experience could be reproduced exactly as it occurred the first time. An event can be repeated, but it will not be experienced in precisely the same way. For example, if you watch a movie today that you first saw last month, your experience of it will be different the second time. Your mood may not be the same, and during the elapsed month you were exposed to events that affected your attitudes and emotions. Maybe you read something unpleasant about an actor in the film. Or you may feel more content because your grades are improving.

However, although such repeated events are not experienced identically, recurrent features or themes will emerge. Some aspects of a situation will be similar to those

Table-11-1 Corollaries of personal construct theory

<i>Construction</i>	Because repeated events are similar, we can predict or anticipate how we will experience such an event in the future.
<i>Individuality</i>	People perceive events in different ways.
<i>Organization</i>	We arrange our constructs in patterns, according to our view of their similarities and differences.
<i>Dichotomy</i>	Constructs are bipolar; for example, if we have an opinion about honesty, that idea must also include the concept of dishonesty.
<i>Choice</i>	We choose the alternative for each construct that works best for us, the one that allows us to predict the outcome of anticipated events.
<i>Range</i>	Our constructs may apply to many situations or people, or they may be limited to a single person or situation.
<i>Experience</i>	We continually test our constructs against life's experiences to make sure they remain useful.
<i>Modulation</i>	We may modify our constructs as a function of new experiences.
<i>Fragmentation</i>	We may sometimes have contradictory or inconsistent subordinate constructs within our overall construct system.
<i>Commonality</i>	Although our individual constructs are unique to us, people in compatible groups or cultures may hold similar constructs.
<i>Sociality</i>	We try to understand how other people think and predict what they will do, and we modify our behavior accordingly.

© Cengage Learning 2013

experienced earlier. It is on the basis of these similarities that we predict or establish anticipations about how we will deal with that type of event in the future. Our predictions rest on the idea that future events, though they are not duplicates of past events, will nevertheless be similar. For example, some scenes in the movie probably affect you the same way every time. If you liked the car chase scenes the first time, you will probably like them again. You base your behavior on your anticipation of liking the chases, so that explains why you choose to watch the film again. Themes of the past reappear in the future, and we formulate our constructs on the basis of these recurring themes.

The Individuality Corollary

Individual differences in interpreting events With this corollary, Kelly introduced the notion of individual differences. He pointed out that people differ from one another in how they perceive or interpret an event, and because people construe events differently, they thus form different constructs. Our constructs do not so much reflect the objective reality of an event as they constitute the unique interpretation each of us places on it.

The Organization Corollary

Relationships among constructs We organize individual constructs into a pattern according to our view of their interrelationships, their similarities and differences. People who hold similar constructs may still differ from one another if they organize those constructs in different patterns.

Typically, we organize our constructs into a hierarchy, with some constructs subordinate to others. A construct can include one or more subordinate constructs. For example, the construct *good* may include among its subordinates the constructs *intelligent* and *moral*.

Thus, if we meet someone who fits our idea of a good person, we anticipate that he or she will also have the attributes of intelligence and high moral standards.

The relationships among constructs are usually more enduring than the specific constructs themselves, but they, too, are open to change. A person who feels insulted by someone who appears more intelligent may switch the construct *intelligent* from a subordinate place under the construct *good* to a place under the construct *bad*. The only valid test for a construct system is its predictive efficiency. If the organization of our constructs no longer provides a useful way to predict events, we will modify it.

The Dichotomy Corollary

Two mutually exclusive alternatives All constructs are bipolar or dichotomous. This is necessary if we are to anticipate future events correctly. Just as we note similarities among people or events, we must also account for dissimilarities. For example, it is not enough to have a construct about a friend that describes the personal characteristic of *honesty*. We must also consider the opposite, *dishonesty*, to explain how the honest person differs from someone who is not honest. If we did not make this distinction—if we assumed that all people are honest—then forming a construct about honesty would not help us anticipate or predict anything about people we might meet in the future. A person can be expected to be honest only in contrast to someone who is expected to be dishonest. The appropriate personal construct in this example, then, is *honest versus dishonest*. Our constructs must always be framed in terms of a pair of mutually exclusive alternatives.

The Choice Corollary

Freedom of choice The notion that people have freedom of choice is found throughout Kelly's writings. According to the dichotomy corollary described above, each construct has two opposing poles. For every situation we must choose the alternative that works best for us, the one that allows us to anticipate or predict the outcome of future events.

Kelly suggested that we have some latitude in deciding between the alternatives, and he described it as a choice between security and adventure. Suppose you must decide which of two courses to take next semester. One is easy because it is not much different from a course you've already taken and is taught by a professor known to give high grades for little work. There is virtually no risk involved in choosing that course, but there may not be much reward either. You know the professor is dull, and you have already studied much of the course material. However, it is the secure choice, because you can make a highly accurate prediction about the consequences of deciding to take it.

The other course is more of a gamble. The professor is new and rumored to be tough, and you don't know much about the subject. It would expose you to a field of study you've been curious about. In this case, you cannot make an accurate prediction about the outcome of your choice. This more adventurous alternative means more risk, but the potential reward and satisfaction are greater.

You must choose between the low-risk, minimal-reward secure option and the high-risk, high-reward adventurous option. The first has a high predictive efficiency, the second a lower predictive efficiency. Kelly believed we face such choices throughout life, choices between defining or extending our personal construct system. The secure choice, which is similar to past choices, further defines our construct system by repeating experiences and events. The more adventurous choice extends our construct system by encompassing new experiences and events.

from one
the ways
are and
same



Comstock Images/Jupiter Images

The popular tendency to opt for the secure, low-risk alternative may explain why some people persist in behaving in an unrewarding way. For example, why does some one act aggressively toward other people even when continually rebuffed? Kelly's answer was that the person is making the low-risk choice because he or she has come to know what to expect from others in response to aggressive behavior. The hostile person does not know how people will react to friendliness because he or she has rarely tried it. The potential rewards may be greater for friendly behavior but so is the uncertainty for this person.

Remember that our choices are made in terms of how well they allow us to anticipate or predict events, not necessarily in terms of what is best for us. And it is Kelly's contention that each of us, in the best scientific tradition, desires to predict the future with the highest possible degree of certainty.

The Range Corollary

The range of convenience Few personal constructs are appropriate or relevant for all situations. Consider the construct *tall versus short*, which obviously has a limited **range of convenience** or applicability. It can be useful with respect to buildings, trees, or basketball players, but it is of no value in describing a pizza or the weather.

Some constructs can be applied to many situations or people, whereas others are more limited, perhaps appropriate for one person or situation. The range of convenience or relevance for a construct is a matter of personal choice. For example, we may believe that the construct *loyal versus disloyal* applies to everyone we meet or only to our family

convenience
m of events
construct
died. Some
are relevant
number of
situations;
ructs are

members or to our pet dog. According to Kelly, if we are to understand personality fully, it is just as important to know what is excluded from a construct's range of convenience as it is to know what is included.

The Experience Corollary

Exposure to new experiences We have said that each construct is a hypothesis generated on the basis of past experience to predict or anticipate future events. Each construct is then tested against reality by determining how well it predicted a given event. Most of us are exposed to new experiences daily, so the process of testing the fit of a construct to see how well it predicted the event is ongoing. If a construct is not a valid predictor of the outcome of the situation, then it must be reformulated or replaced. Thus, we evaluate and reinterpret our constructs as our environment changes. Constructs that worked for us at age 16 may be useless, or even harmful, at age 40. In the intervening years, our experiences will have led us to revise our construct system. If you never have any new experiences, then your construct system would never have to change. But for most of us, life involves meeting new people and coping with new challenges. Therefore, we must re-construct our experiences and constructs accordingly.

The Modulation Corollary

Adapting to new experiences Constructs differ in their **permeability**. To permeate means to penetrate or pass through something. A permeable construct is one that allows new elements to penetrate or be admitted to the range of convenience. Such a construct is open to new events and experiences and is capable of being revised or extended by them.

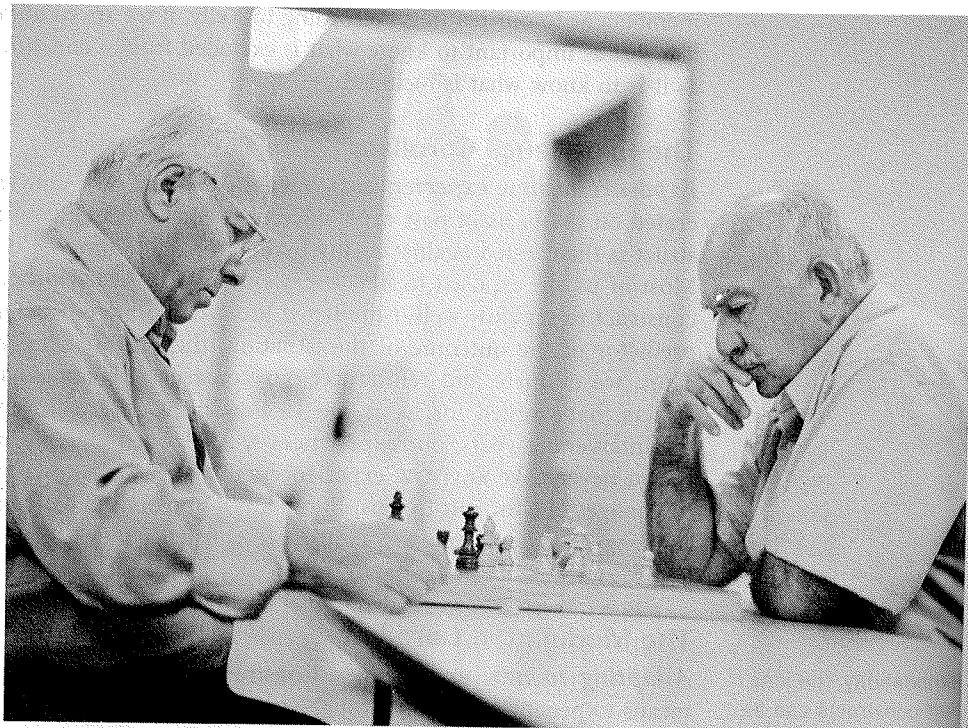
How much our construct system can be modulated, or adjusted, as a function of new experience and learning depends on the permeability of the individual constructs. An impermeable or rigid construct is not capable of being changed, no matter what our experiences tell us. For example, if a bigoted person applies the construct *high intelligence versus low intelligence* in a fixed or impermeable way to people of a certain ethnic minority group, believing that all members of this group have low intelligence, then new experiences will not penetrate or alter this belief. The prejudiced person will not modify that construct, no matter how many highly intelligent people of that ethnic group he or she meets. The construct is a barrier to learning and to new ideas because it is incapable of being changed or revised.

The Fragmentation Corollary

Competition among constructs Kelly believed that within our construct system some constructs might be incompatible even though they coexist within the overall pattern. Recall that our construct system may change as we evaluate new experiences. However, new constructs do not necessarily derive from old ones. A new construct may be compatible or consistent with an old one in a given situation, but if the situation changes, these constructs can become inconsistent.

(Consider the following situation. A man meets a woman in a psychology class and decides that he is attracted to her. She is also a psychology major, and her interests seem similar to his. She fits the *friend* alternative of the construct *friend versus enemy*. Thus, she is someone to be liked and respected. He sees her the next day at a political rally and is disappointed to find her loudly expressing conservative views that are the opposite of his own liberal opinions. Now she also fits the opposite alternative of the construct. In that situation she has become the *enemy*.)

permeability The idea that constructs can be revised and extended in light of new experiences.



This inconsistency in the man's construct about this woman is at a subordinate level in his overall construct system. In one situation she is a friend, and in another situation she is an enemy. However, his broader construct, that liberals are friends and conservatives are enemies, remains undisturbed. According to Kelly, this is the process by which we tolerate subordinate inconsistencies without damaging our overall construct system.

The Commonality Corollary

Similarities among people in interpreting events Because people differ in the way they construe events, each person develops unique constructs. However, people also show similarities in their ways of construing events. Kelly suggested that if several people construe an experience similarly, we can conclude that their cognitive processes are similar. Consider a group of people with the same cultural norms and ideals. Their anticipations and expectations of one another will have much in common and they will construe many of their experiences in the same way. People from the same culture may show a resemblance in their behaviors and characteristics even though they are exposed to different life events.

The Sociality Corollary

Interpersonal relationships We noted above that people in the same culture tend to construe events similarly. Although this accounts for some commonalities among people, it does not in itself bring about positive social relationships. It is not enough for one person to construe or interpret experiences in the same way as another person. The first person must also construe the other person's constructs. In other words, we must understand how another person thinks if we are to anticipate how that person will predict events.

Construing another person's constructs is something we do routinely. Think about driving a car. We stake our lives on being able to anticipate what the other driver

the road will do; we anticipate that they will stop at a red light and move ahead at a green light. It is only when we can predict with some certainty what drivers of SUVs, friends, bosses, or teachers will do that we can adjust our behaviors to theirs. And while we are adapting to them, they are doing the same to us.

Each person assumes a role with respect to others. We play one role with a partner, another with a child, another with our supervisor at work. Each role is a behavior pattern that evolves from understanding how the other person construes events. In a sense, then, we fit ourselves into the other person's constructs.

Log On

Personal Construct Psychology Information Center

Official Web site of the Personal Construct Psychology Information Center, Hamburg, Germany. Includes considerable English-language information on Kelly's personal construct psychology as well as links to related sites.

Personal Construct Theory: An Internet Journal

Check out the free Internet journal called *Personal Construct Theory and Practice*.

Questions about Human Nature

Kelly's personality theory presents an optimistic, even flattering, image of human nature (Kelly, 1969). Kelly treated people as rational beings capable of forming a framework of constructs through which to view the world. He believed we are the authors, not the victims, of our destiny. His view endows us with free will, the ability to choose the direction our life will take, and we are able to change when necessary by revising old constructs and forming new ones. We are not committed to a path laid down in childhood or adolescence. Our direction is clearly toward the future because we formulate constructs to predict or anticipate events.

Thus, Kelly did not accept historical determinism. He did not consider past events to be the determinants of present behavior. We are not prisoners of toilet training, early sex experiences, or parental rejection, nor are we bound by biological instincts or unconscious forces. We need no push from internal drives or needs because we are motivated by the fact of being alive. Kelly saw no reason to invoke any other explanation.

Although Kelly did not discuss the role of heredity in personality, he noted that we are not totally determined by environmental influences. We live by constructs based on our interpretation of events. Therefore, it is the operation of our rational mental processes and not the specific events that influence the formation of personality. Kelly did not posit an ultimate and necessary life goal, but we may infer that our goal is to establish a construct system that enables us to predict events. On the question of uniqueness versus universality, Kelly took a moderate position. The commonality corollary states that people in the same culture develop similar constructs, whereas the individuality corollary emphasizes the uniqueness of many of our constructs and therefore of the self.

Assessment in Kelly's Theory

The Interview

Kelly's primary assessment technique was the interview. He wrote, "If you don't know what is going on in a person's mind, ask him; he may tell you!" (1958, p. 330). Adopting what he called a "credulous attitude," Kelly accepted the client's words at face value.

believing this was the best way to determine the person's constructs. He also recognized that a person might deliberately lie or distort the reported version of events. However, what the client said must be respected, even if not fully believed.

Self-Characterization Sketches

Another technique used to assess a construct system is to have the person write a **self-characterization sketch**. Kelly's instructions to the client were as follows. "I want you to write a character sketch of [client's name] just as if he were the principal character in a play. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew him very intimately and very sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone ever really could know him" (1955, p. 323). Kelly found this technique useful for learning how clients perceive themselves in relation to other people.

The Role Construct Repertory Test

Kelly devised the Role Construct Repertory (REP) Test to uncover the constructs we apply to the important people in our lives. The client is asked to list by name the people who have played a significant role in his or her life such as mother, father, spouse, closest friend, and the most intelligent or interesting person he or she knows (see Table 11-2). The names are sorted, three at a time, and clients are asked to select from each group of three the two people who are most alike, noting how they differ from the third. For example, the client may be given the names of most threatening person, successful person, and attractive person

Table-11-2 Role title list from the Role Construct Repertory Test

1. A teacher you liked.
2. A teacher you disliked.
3. Your wife/husband or present boyfriend/girlfriend.
4. An employer, supervisor, or officer under whom you worked or served and whom you found hard to get along with.
5. An employer, supervisor, or officer under whom you worked or served and whom you liked.
6. Your mother or the person who has played the part of a mother in your life.
7. Your father or the person who has played the part of a father in your life.
8. Your brother nearest your age or the person who has been most like a brother.
9. Your sister nearest your age or the person who has been most like a sister.
10. A person with whom you have worked who was easy to get along with.
11. A person with whom you have worked who was hard to understand.
12. A neighbor with whom you get along well.
13. A neighbor whom you find hard to understand.
14. A boy you got along well with when you were in high school.
15. A girl you got along well with when you were in high school.
16. A boy you did not like when you were in high school.
17. A girl you did not like when you were in high school.
18. A person of your own sex whom you would enjoy having as a companion on a trip.
19. A person of your own sex whom you would dislike having as a companion on a trip.
20. A person with whom you have been closely associated recently who appears to dislike you.
21. The person whom you would most like to be of help to or whom you feel most sorry for.
22. The most intelligent person whom you know personally.
23. The most successful person whom you know personally.
24. The most interesting person whom you know personally.

Source: Reprinted from *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, by George A. Kelly. Copyright © 1991 by Brunner/Mazel, Inc. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.

and must describe how any two of them are similar in some aspect of behavior or character and how they differ from the other.

This information is presented in a diagram called a repertory grid (see Figure 11-1). For each row the client judges the three people indicated by the circles and formulates a construct about them, such as *happy versus sad*. The client writes a word or phrase that describes two of them in the column labeled *Emergent Pole* (in our example, the word *happy*). The client writes the opposite word (*sad*) to describe the third person in the group in the column labeled *Implicit Pole*. The client places a check mark in the squares of anyone else in the grid who shares the *Emergent Pole* characteristics, in this case, anyone significant in the client's life who could be described as happy.

The assumption underlying the REP Test is that people construe events in dichotomies, according to the dichotomy corollary, in terms of like versus unlike or similar versus dissimilar. By forcing clients to make repeated judgments about their social relationships, Kelly believed he could uncover their anticipations and expectations. The dichotomies or alternatives by which we guide our life will show the pattern of our personal constructs.

Interpretation of the REP Test depends on the skill and training of the psychologist who administers it. Kelly did not intend the test to be a standardized, objective self-report inventory. He designed it as a way to assess constructs as a necessary stage in psychotherapy, to induce clients to reveal the constructs by which they organize their world. However, computer programs have since been developed to analyze individual repertory grids.

Fixed Role Therapy

After assessing a client's system of personal constructs, Kelly attempted to bring about a change in undesirable or ineffective constructs. He promoted a form of psychotherapy he called **fixed role therapy**. To help clients formulate new constructs and discard old ones, he asked them to write a self-characterization sketch describing them as the lead character in a play.

In fixed role therapy, the therapist prepares a fixed role sketch containing constructs that differ from the client's negative self-perceptions as revealed in the self-characterization sketch. The client is told that the fixed role sketch is about a fictitious character and is asked to act out that character in the therapist's office and later in everyday life. Through this role-playing, the client is expected to project personal needs and values onto the fictitious character. The therapist expects the client to discover that the new constructs in the fixed role sketch work better in anticipating events than do the old constructs by which the client was living. Once the client realizes this, he or she can incorporate the new constructs into the overall construct system and function in a more satisfying and effective way.

Kelly developed fixed role therapy from observing a friend who began to live the role he was playing in a college dramatic production. The friend was so strongly influenced by the part that his behavior offstage gradually became more and more like the character. The goal of fixed role therapy, then, is to first play a role and then come to live it.

Consider the following example. Based on interviews with a male client, his written self-characterization sketch, and his REP Test results, the therapist concluded that the client was overly concerned with finding a female companion. His efforts were having a negative impact on his other social relationships. The client had difficulty being open and assertive because in his construct system assertiveness and extraversion were negative personality characteristics. Yet, in dealing with other people, he was convinced that his opinions were the correct ones and that everybody else was wrong. At work, he felt isolated, believing he belonged to a higher social class than his colleagues.

Fixed role therapy
A psychotherapeutic technique in which the client acts out constructs appropriate for a fictitious person. This shows the client how the new constructs can be more effective than the old ones he or she has been using.

Role
teritory

		Constructs																						
		Emergent Pole											Implicit Pole											
		Sort No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Ethical person	19	●																						
Happy person	18	⊗																						
Successful person	17	⊗																						
Boss	16		●																					
Rejected teacher	15		⊗																					
Accepted teacher	14		⊗																					
Attractive person	13			⊗																				
Threatening person	12				⊗																			
Pitied person	11				●																			
Rejecting person	10			⊗																				
Ex-pal	9																							
Pal	8				●																			
Ex-boyfriend/girlfriend	7																							
Spouse	6			⊗																				
Sister	5																							
Brother	4																							
Father	3																							
Mother	2																							
Self	1																							

Source: Reprinted from *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, by George A. Kelly. Copyright © 1991 by Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK

The therapist's fixed role sketch for this client made no mention of the client's desire to have an intimate relationship with a woman. Instead, taking as a framework the client's skill at tennis, the therapist encouraged the client, through the fictitious character, to be more curious about and tolerant of different kinds of people and their views (Winter, 1992, pp. 270-271).

Roy Taylor's philosophy of life very much reflects his approach to his favorite sport, tennis: It's not whether a player wins or loses that's important but whether they've played the game to the best of their ability. Whether at work or at play, he believes that if a job is worth doing it's worth doing well, and he brings to everything that he does a certain passion and conviction, which cannot fail to earn your respect. Although you might perhaps think that this would make him appear a little too serious and intense, once you get to know him you soon realize that his main concern is to live life to the full and that this includes having fun as well as working hard. Life doesn't always run smoothly for him, of course, but when he has a disappointment he always seems able to learn something from it, and to look to the future rather than brooding on his present or past misfortunes.

One of his greatest strengths at tennis is his ability to anticipate the moves of the other players, be they his opponents or doubles partners. In other areas of his life, he also always tries to see the world through the eyes of the people with whom he comes into contact, perhaps because he has mixed with people from so many different walks of life. His lively curiosity in what makes other people tick is usually reciprocated and leads him, almost before he knows it, into some very rewarding relationships. He also, of course, has his fair share of disagreements with others, but when this happens he always makes an effort to understand the other person's point of view, even though he might not accept it. Because of this, he has a reputation both for commitment to those causes that are close to his heart and tolerance of the right of others to hold different opinions.

The therapist reviewed the fixed role sketch with the client and asked whether the character seemed like someone that the client might want to know. The client agreed to try behaving like the character in the sketch while in the therapist's office. He was asked to try acting, thinking, and talking like the character for the next two weeks. Behavioral changes instilled by fixed role therapy are reported to last far beyond the two-week role-playing period. However, positive case reports on treatment outcomes for individual clients must be balanced by the fact that there has been little controlled research on the technique's effectiveness.

Research on Kelly's Theory

Studies using the REP Test have shown that a person's constructs remain stable over time. One group of subjects took the test twice, using the names of different people as role figures each time. Although the role models changed, the constructs that were important to the subjects remained the same. However, research has shown that the validity of the REP test depends heavily on the skill of the psychologist interpreting the results.

One REP Test study investigated the complexity of a person's construct system. The results showed that the pattern becomes increasingly differentiated and integrated over the life span and can process more information as it is able to function in more abstract terms (Crockett, 1982). Another study suggested that forming friendships depends on a similarity of personal constructs. A group of students took the REP Test during their first week at college and again six months later. The data showed that the similarity in

constructs or attitudes among friends did not develop during the six-month period but had existed before the relationships were formed. The researchers concluded that we seek as friends those people whose constructs are already similar to ours (Duck & Spencer, 1972). Also, for married subjects, spouses whose constructs were more alike reported greater happiness with their marriage than did couples whose constructs were more unlike (Neimeyer, 1984).

Other research showed a correspondence between one's personal characteristics and the ways of construing other people. Among a group of student nurses, those identified as highly anxious tended to use *anxious versus non-anxious* as a construct for evaluating others. Those who were judged by peers as friendly tended to view others in terms of a *friendly versus unfriendly* construct (Sechrest, 1968).

The REP Test has been used to study schizophrenics, neurotics, depressives, and persons with organic brain damage. Compared with normal subjects, schizophrenics were found to be unstable and inconsistent in construing other people. However, their construing of objects was stable and consistent, suggesting that their thought disorders applied only to social situations. Their thought processes were also characterized by paranoid delusions and irrational links between constructs (see, for example, Bannister, Fransella, & Agnew, 1971; Bannister & Salmon, 1966; Winter, 1992).

A study using a modified version of the REP Test compared the personal construct systems of repeat patients in psychiatric hospitals with persons hospitalized for the first time. The repeat patients construed their social network as small, limited to a few people on whom they believed they could depend. First-time patients construed their social network as significantly larger (Smith, Stefan, Kovaleski, & Johnson, 1991). REP Test research with juvenile and adult offenders revealed that delinquents tended to identify with action-oriented television heroes rather than with real adults. Newly released prisoners showed poor self-esteem and lowered aspirations for the future. Rapists felt inadequate, immature, and preoccupied with personal failure (Needs, 1988).

Researchers have applied the REP Test in market research to assess the criteria consumers use to evaluate products. Industrial-organizational psychologists have used the REP Test for vocational counseling, employee selection, job performance evaluation, and evaluation of training programs (Benjafield, 2008).

Cognitive Complexity and Cognitive Simplicity

An outgrowth of Kelly's work on personal constructs relates to cognitive styles, that is, differences in how we perceive or construe the persons, objects, and situations in our environment. Research on cognitive styles was derived from the REP Test and focused on the concept of **cognitive complexity**.

A person's degree of cognitive complexity can be determined from the pattern of Xs on the repertory grid. A highly differentiated pattern of Xs indicates cognitive complexity, defined as the ability to discriminate in the process of applying personal constructs to other people. People high in cognitive complexity are able to see variety among people and can easily place a person in many categories.

The other extreme, **cognitive simplicity**, applies when the pattern of Xs on the repertory grid is the same or highly similar for each construct. This indicates that the person is less capable of perceiving differences when judging other people. Persons high in cognitive simplicity are likely to place others in only one or two categories, unable to see much variety.

Research has confirmed personality differences in terms of cognitive style. People high in cognitive complexity are better able to make predictions about other people's

behavior. They more readily recognize differences between themselves and others, are more empathic, and deal better with inconsistent information in construing others than do people high in cognitive simplicity (Crockett, 1982).

Studies of college students in the United States have found that those high in cognitive complexity are lower in anxiety and instability and also tend to possess more than the traditional five factors of personality. People with lower cognitive complexity display fewer than the five factors, suggesting that they are less complex emotionally (Bowler, Bowler, & Phillips, 2009; Lester, 2009). Studies of politicians in the United States and England found that conservatives were high in cognitive simplicity, whereas moderates and liberals displayed higher levels of cognitive complexity (Tetlock, 1983, 1984). Research on mental health counselors and therapists showed that those with more training and experience demonstrated greater cognitive complexity than those with less training and fewer years of experience (Granello, 2010; Owen & Lindley, 2010).

In Kelly's theory, cognitive complexity is the more desirable and useful cognitive style. Our goal in developing a construct system is to reduce uncertainty by being able to predict or anticipate what people will do. This gives us a guide for our own behavior. People with a more complex cognitive style will be more successful at this task than will people with a simpler cognitive style. Therefore, cognitive style is an important dimension of personality.

Studies show that cognitive complexity increases with age; adults generally possess greater cognitive complexity than children. However, age is not a complete explanation for cognitive complexity; many adults still possess cognitive simplicity. Much depends on the level of complexity of our childhood experiences. Adults high in cognitive complexity typically had more diverse experiences in childhood. Their parents were less authoritarian and more likely to grant autonomy than parents of adults high in cognitive simplicity (Sechrest & Jackson, 1961).

A study of first-year college students in Canada found that those who scored higher in cognitive complexity adjusted better to the stresses of college life than did those lower in cognitive complexity (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000).

A study of 40 couples found that although the women scored significantly higher in cognitive complexity than the men did, there was a high correlation in cognitive complexity between men and women who were partners. The researcher suggested that these partners may have chosen each other because of their similar pre-existing levels of cognitive complexity, or else they developed this similarity as a result of living together. Either way, these partners tended to construe their worlds in a similar manner (Adams-Webber, 2001).

Comparisons were made of monocultural Anglo-American and bicultural Chinese-American college students. The Chinese-American students had been born in China and lived at least five years in the United States. The results showed that the bicultural students scored higher in cognitive complexity than the monocultural students (Benet-Martinez, Lee, & Leu, 2006).

A variant of cognitive complexity is *attributional complexity*, which is defined as the extent to which people prefer complex rather than simple explanations for social behavior. In other words, they attribute the behavior of other people to complicated, multifaceted, and more sophisticated causes.

People who measure high in attributional complexity have been shown to be more sensitive to and perceptive of subtle signs of racism. They also show greater empathy toward and greater understanding of other people (Foels & Reid, 2010; Reid & Foels, 2010).

HIGHLIGHTS: Research on Kelly's Ideas

Research using the *REP Test* has found that:

- ◆ Our personal constructs remain stable over time
- ◆ We chose friends whose constructs are like ours
- ◆ Spouses whose constructs were alike were happier
- ◆ Schizophrenics formed stable constructs of objects but not of people.
- ◆ Delinquents identified with action heroes rather than real people

People who score high in *cognitive complexity* tend to:

- ◆ Score low in anxiety
- ◆ Have more than the traditional five factors of personality
- ◆ Be good at predicting how others will behave
- ◆ Have moderate to liberal political views
- ◆ Had more diverse experiences in childhood
- ◆ Adjust better to the stresses of college

People high in *attributional complexity*:

- ◆ Attribute the behavior of others to complex causes
- ◆ Have greater empathy and understanding of others
- ◆ Are sensitive to subtle signs of racism

Reflections on Kelly's Theory

Kelly developed a unique personality theory that did not derive from or build on other theories. It emerged from his interpretation, his own construct system, of data provided by his clinical practice. It is a personal view, and its originality parallels its message, that we are capable of developing the framework for our life.

Kelly's system has been criticized on several points. It focuses on intellectual and rational aspects of human functioning to the exclusion of emotional aspects. Kelly's image of a person rationally constructing the present and future, forming and testing hypotheses, and making predictions as the basis for behavior does not coincide with the everyday experiences of clinical psychologists who see more extreme examples of human behavior. To them, Kelly's rational being seems to be an ideal that exists in the abstract but not in reality. Although Kelly did not deal explicitly with emotions, he recognized them as personal constructs, similar in their formation to other constructs.

We noted that Sigmund Freud's view of personality derived from his exposure to neurotic, middle-class Viennese patients, who presented him with a distorted, unrepresentative sample of human nature. Other theorists have been similarly criticized. Kelly's viewpoint was also unrepresentative, limited largely to Midwestern young adults in the process of defining a construct system that would help them cope with college life.

Kelly's theory, like many others, leaves unanswered questions. Each of us is able to construe events in a unique way, but why does one person construe an event in one way while another person construes the same event in a different way? What process or mechanism accounts for the difference? A person makes choices about defining or extending the construct system. What determines whether to opt for security or for adventure, for the safer or the riskier alternative?

Personal construct theory continues to enjoy a large and growing base of support although this is much broader in Europe, Canada, and Australia than in the United States. In the mid-1980s, the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology was established

applications of the theory. The *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology* and the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* began publication in the late 1980s, and in 1990 the first volume of the series *Advances in Personal Construct Psychology* appeared. References to Kelly's work have appeared in almost half of the volumes of the *Annual Review of Psychology* over a 40-year period from 1955 to 2007.

Kelly's work is not as popular in the United States for several reasons. First, many psychologists see it as too different from prevailing ideas. Personality psychologists typically think in terms of the familiar concepts of motivation and emotion, unconscious forces, drives, and needs, which form no part of Kelly's system. Second, Kelly published few books, articles, or case studies, devoting most of his time to clinical work and to training graduate students. The writing style of his two major books is scholarly, not intended for the public or for the therapist seeking explanations of human passions and emotions, loves and hatreds, fears and dreams. Such was not the style of the man or his theory.

Kelly recognized the limitations of his program and made no pretense of setting forth a finished theory. Just as an individual's constructs change in light of new experiences, so Kelly expected the personal construct theory to change with further research and application. His contributions have been recognized with honors from the profession and from former students. His theory is one of the most unusual to appear in a century of theorizing about the nature of the human personality. Adherents continue to apply it to problems in clinical psychology, industrial psychology, anthropology, criminology, and urban planning as a way of modifying and predicting behavior in many walks of life (Butt, 208; Walker & Winter, 2007).

Chapter Summary

Kelly viewed people as similar to scientists who construct hypotheses and test them against reality. A personal construct is a way of looking at events. Kelly's fundamental postulate states that psychological processes are directed by the ways we anticipate events and construe our world. The theory includes 11 corollaries. Kelly presented an optimistic image of human nature that depicts us as rational beings with free will, capable of directing our destiny. We are not bound by constructs developed at one stage of life or by past experiences, unconscious conflicts, and biological instincts. Our goal is to define a set of constructs that enables us to predict events.

Kelly assessed personality by accepting a person's words at face value, by having the person write a self-characterization sketch, and by the Role Construct Repertory (REP) Test. The REP Test uncovers dichotomies important in a person's life, revealing the pattern of personal constructs. Fixed role therapy involves having a client act out the constructs of an imaginary person to demonstrate how to implement new constructs that will

be more effective than old ones. REP Test research has shown that constructs are stable over time. The validity of the test depends on the skill of the psychologist interpreting it. The test has been used for market research, performance appraisal, and vocational counseling.

People high in cognitive complexity are better able to predict the behavior of others. They more readily recognize differences between themselves and others. They are more empathic, less anxious and unstable, deal better with inconsistent information in construing others, and experience greater complexity in childhood than people high in cognitive simplicity. Those high in attributional complexity view the behavior of other people as being more complex and multifaceted than do those low in attributional complexity.

Kelly's work has been criticized for omitting familiar concepts such as motivation and emotion, for focusing on the rational aspects of human functioning to the exclusion of emotional aspects, and for relying on an unrepresentative sample of subjects.

Review Questions

1. What did Kelly mean when he suggested that we all function like scientists in trying to predict and control the events in our lives?
2. How does Kelly's approach to personality differ from the other approaches we have discussed?