

INCORPORATING DEVELOPMENT INTO PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY

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The ideas of Werner (1957) and Mehrabian (1968) are used to suggest how developmental processes can be introduced into George Kelly's personal construct theory, and the major theories of human development (Freud, Erikson, Ainsworth and others) are explored for their implications for the content of constructs that individuals develop over time. Ten critical questions for Personal Construct Theory are posed to stimulate further theory and research on these issues.

Keywords: *development, personal construct theory, Heinz Werner.*

George Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs envisions every person as a scientist who comes up with hypotheses or predictions about the world, including everyday events and social interactions, based on their own system of 'constructs.' Depending on the validation or invalidation of a construct, a person may keep the construct, modify it, or get rid of it. In this way, "personality is continually taking new shape" (p. 57). It is clear, therefore, that Kelly's theory involves *change* in the constructs and construct systems of individuals.

However, although Kelly's theory allows for change, the theory provides a phenomenological description of the individual at a particular point in time and lacks a developmental orientation (Crockett, 1982), a complaint that Fransella and Neimeyer (2003) noted is frequently advanced. Indeed, Fransella (1995) noted that this omission was deliberate. Vaughn and Pfenninger (1994) argued that a developmental orientation was incompatible with Kelly's theory. Focusing on stage theories, they argued that stage theories have two components: (1) stages have inevitable structure or content, and (2) stage theories involve directionality. Both of these are incompatible with Kelly's theory, according to Vaughn and Pfenninger. Vaughn and Pfenninger argued that individuals are "never bound by past constructions to arrive inevitably at specific new constructions" (p. 182). As for the directionality of development, Vaughn and Pfenninger noted that people can progress or regress. There is no

one direction for all individuals to take. Vaughn and Pfenninger gave examples of how *change* can occur in Kelly's theory (see below), but they rejected *development*.

In contrast, this essay seeks to provide suggestions for a developmental component for Kelly's theory, drawing on the work of Werner (1957) and Mehrabian (1968).¹ To sharpen the argument here, a series of critical questions is proposed, some of which have occasionally been considered by personal construct theorists, but some of which have not.

DEVELOPMENT VERSUS CHANGE

Many personal construct theorists use the term 'development' to mean change rather than changes over the life-span found in most, if not all, people (e.g., Sigel & Holmgren, 1983). Anderson (1990) asserted that "personality development follows from a person's unique construction of experience" (p. 81), and the emphasis on uniqueness hinders the formulation of developmental changes common to all individuals.

As Viney (1992) pointed out, Kelly's theory contains many suggestions as to how *change* might take place. For example, construction systems can change though: (1) modifications in the

¹ We include both understanding and explaining changes with age as important tasks for personal construct theory. For a discussion of this distinction, see Butt (2004).

meaning of constructs if the constructs are permeable, that is, if they allow new elements into both poles of the construct; (2) anxiety, which is aroused through our inability to construe what we are experiencing, leading to efforts to change our construction system; (3) the receipt of disconfirming evidence after we have made a prediction can lead to either realistic acceptance and change or to hostile maneuvers; and (4) the creativity cycle involves loosening and then tightening constructs in order to generate new ideas. Viney noted that change is easier for peripheral constructs than for core constructs and that change occurs in times of transition (when an individual moves from one situation to another, such as graduating from college) and in times of crisis. These four processes involve change but they do not provide a developmental explanation.

Developmental explanations focus, not only on common changes in psychological processing over the life-span, but also on the causes of particular end-points. For example, why do some individuals accept disconfirming evidence while others adopt hostile maneuvers? What early experiences shaped this choice? How might we raise children so that they can engage easily in the creativity cycle (moving from tight to loose and back to tight construing)? This kind of explanation is lacking in Kelly's theory.

HEINZ WERNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON DEVELOPMENT

The standard developmental path in systems theory is that, "...it proceeds from a state of relative globality and lack of differentiation to a state of increasing differentiation, articulation, and hierarchic integration" (Werner, 1957, p. 126). This results in an increasing number of relatively autonomous units and increasing integration between these units, which implies an increasing number of interrelationships between the units.

In personal construct theory, the basic units are constructs and there is an overall system of constructs. Not all constructs are equivalent. One construct may, for example, be an element to be

classified in another construct. Constructs may, therefore, be arranged hierarchically, with superordinate constructs subsuming subordinate constructs. For example, the subordinate construct *intelligent-stupid* may be one element of a superordinate construct 'the kind of person I like versus the kind of person I dislike.'

Furthermore, the Fragmentation Corollary (Kelly, 1955, p. 83) states that "A person may successively employ a variety of construction subsystems which are inferentially incompatible with each other." This corollary implies that there are subsystems within the system. Kelly coined the term suspension to describe the situation in which the person operates on one subsystem of constructs while ignoring input from other subsystems of constructs.

One critical question is how many subsystems of constructs an individual has. In factor analyses of REP Grids, one measure of cognitive complexity is the number of factors (clusters of constructs) that are identified. Might the number of factors be a measure of how many subsystems an individual possesses?²

Critical Question 1:

How many subsystems of constructs make up an individual's construction system and which factors have an impact on changes in this number over time.

A second critical question is how many levels there may be in the construction system of an individual between the system as a whole and the individual constructs. Are there only subsystems, or can there be subsystems, subsystems, and so on? A simple account of development is that the number of levels increases as the individual matures and the number of units within each level also increases. Just as Kelly proposed that the construction system as a whole was made up of a finite number of constructs (the Dichotomy Corollary), we can propose that there are a finite number of levels and a finite number of units within each level.

² The other measure of cognitive complexity, the amount of variance accounted for by the first factor, seems less suitable as a measure of the number of subsystems that an individual possesses.

Critical question 2:

How many levels exist in an individual's construction (subsystems, subsystems, etc) and what developmental factors affect this?

Kelly proposed that alternative sets of constructs typically exist, and some are suspended while the individual makes decisions based on one set. In light of this, holistic theories such as that of Andras Angyal (1965) and Eric Berne (1961) raise important questions of interaction and coordination between these subsystems,³ an issue highlighted by Crockett (1982) who noted two important aspects of relations between constructs: (1) a hierarchical organization into superordinate and subordinate constructs, and (2) the implications that constructs have for one another, as in constellatory construing.⁴

Honess (1979) classified the constructs as concrete (e.g., based on appearance) versus abstract (e.g., based on personality traits) and examined (by means of the Grid) whether one construct implied (or was implied by) another (analogous to the concept of constellatory versus prepositional construing). Honess documented changes in the direction predicted by Werner's ideas for children aged 8 to 13, but the changes were clearer in the girls than in the boys.

Critical Question 3:

If the mind is conceptualized as comprised of several construction systems, some of which are suspended while one has executive power, how do these part-systems interact and coordinate?

HOW DO CONSTRUCTS CHANGE WITH AGE?

The major developmental psychology theories suggest explanations of why and how constructs

might change as people get older. Viney (1992) noted three developmental processes. First, constructs move from being preemptive and concrete in young children to being more flexible and abstract. Second, the system of constructs becomes more differentiated but also more integrated over time. Third, the content of the constructs changes over time. However, Viney did not elaborate on these processes.

The nature of constructs in childhood

Using general concepts and processes put forth by developmental psychologists, some proposals for the changes that might occur in constructs and in construct systems during childhood can be made, namely that constructs become more abstract, differentiated and integrated (Applegate, 1983) and less concrete, sparse and globally organized.⁵

As we move from sensorimotor to perceptual to cognitive functioning, each level involves more differentiation and more hierarchical organization and an increasing differentiation of the self from the environment (Mehrabian, 1968). Mehrabian, in his discussion of cognitive development, proposed that the existence of many subordinate and less abstract cognitions (here we can substitute the term constructs) makes it easier to develop superordinate or abstract constructs since development involves increasing differentiation and integration of existing constructs.

Mehrabian noted that development may be uneven. An individual may have a highly developed set of constructs for his or her profession, but a less developed set of constructs for interpersonal relationships or vice versa. Kelly's theory takes this into account in his definition of aggression versus passivity. The aggressive person actively elaborates his perceptual field in a particular area and, therefore, could eventually develop a developmentally mature set of constructs for this area.

³ See also Lester (2007) for additional possibilities of critical questions for subsystems.

⁴ A detailed analysis of such implications was provided by Hinkle (1965).

⁵ The relevance of Piaget's (1958) concept of accommodation to these changes has been noted (Crockett, 1982).

Critical Question 4:

What factors determine the extent to which individuals develop abstract constructs?

Critical Question 5:

What factors determine the unevenness in construct development (that is, why certain areas are less developed than others)?

Research on constructs in childhood

Salmon (1985) argued against the limitations of traditional developmental psychology with its emphasis on the incompetence of children. The approach of personal construct theory can provide a more growth-oriented, humanistic view of the cognitive abilities and cognitive development of children. There has been some personal construct research on the constructs of children and the development of their constructs, although the methodology used by some of the research (such as providing constructs rather than eliciting constructs) has been criticized (Klion & Leitner, 1985).

Klion and Leitner (1985) used an elicitation technique and found that the type of constructs elicited from children changed from kindergarten to 6th grade (age 12). Constructs based on appearance became less frequent with increasing age, constructs involving behavior peaked in 4th graders (aged 10), while constructs involving social roles and constructs involving personality became more common with increasing age. Similar results were reported by Barratt (1977) in a study of children aged 8 to 14. This seems to indicate that constructs become more abstract as children become older.

Scarlett, Press, and Crockett (1971) attempted to test some of Werner's ideas using children by eliciting constructs from essays that the children wrote about their peers. They found that the total number of constructs used by the children increased with age from 1st grade to 5th grade (ages 6 to 11), and there was a transition from egocen-

tric and concrete constructs to non-egocentric and abstract constructs.

Adams-Webber (2003) reviewed research on children and adolescents that shows that their ability to differentiate themselves from others increases progressively during this period and, in particular, to differentiate themselves from their parents, both same sex parents and opposite sex parents. Differentiation in constructs is often operationally defined as cognitive complexity, and Vacc and Greenleaf (1975) found that a measure of cognitive complexity increased in a regular fashion in 3rd grade children to 7th grade children (ages 9 and 13, respectively), with adults scoring even higher on cognitive complexity. Brook (1981), in a very small sample of adults, found evidence that cognitive complexity peaks in middle age (25-60 years) and declines thereafter. Deitch and Jones (1983) studied adults and found that the content of constructs elicited by the REP Test changed with the level of ego-development (Loevinger, 1966), with factually descriptive constructs becoming less common and self-sufficiency and emotional arousal constructs becoming more common.⁶

It is noteworthy that much of the relevant research has focused on young children and early adolescents. Much less research has been conducted on young, middle-aged and elderly adults. However, Applegate (1983) noted that research seems to suggest that development in the abstract nature of constructs is more noticeable in late adolescence and adulthood than is an increase in complexity.

Another question commonly asked in developmental psychology is whether psychological processes change gradually with increasing age or whether clear stages can be identified. The research studies reviewed above support a 'gradual change' perspective,⁷ but it is of interest to explore whether a stage theory of development in personal construct theory can be proposed.

⁶ Crockett (1982) noted that there are several operational definitions of cognitive complexity, with low correlations between them, and that not all measures increase with age.

⁷ Crockett (1982) noted that the precise ages at which changes in constructs occur varies from study to study.

Critical Question 6:

How do the processes in personal construct theory change with age?

Critical Question 7:

What are the typical developmental stages for constructs and construct systems across the life-span, from childhood to old age?

Critical question 8:

Can a stage theory for the development of construction systems be proposed?

THE CONTENT OF CONSTRUCTS ACROSS THE LIFE-SPAN

Personal construct theory is concerned less than other theories of personality with the content of constructs and with regularities in the content that are common to all individuals. There are many stage theories of development, both for the early years and across the life-span, that could provide the basis for describing commonalities in the constructs that people develop. Thus, all of the classic developmental theories provide suggestions for commonalities in the constructs that develop.

In his proposal of the psychosexual stages of development, Freud described five stages of development for desires and in the issues that confront children and adolescents: oral, anal, phallic, puberty and genital. Constructs could be formed based on the desires, frustrations and issues of each stage. For example, oral frustrations and fixations could be the basis for some constructs, such as receiving too much gratification or not enough gratification during this stage. A person may continue to expect that they should receive too much or too little satisfaction and behave according to these expectations. Fixations may, therefore, imply that some of the individual's constructs will be concerned with these issues, issues such as dependency and trust as well as, more directly, oral desires.

Erikson (1959) proposed an eight stage psychosocial (rather than psychosexual) theory of development. Breaking down each phase of the

entire lifespan enables us to consider how constructs related to different aspects of the self may develop over time according to our age. Constructs related to basic trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry may develop based on our experiences in childhood, whereas constructs related to identity, intimacy with others, as well as our sense of generativity and integrity, may develop as we grow older.

Object Relations theorists have expanded on Freud's ideas. For example, Fairbairn (1954) proposed that, during infancy, the child takes into the psyche different parts of the mother - good objects and bad objects. At first the child is only able to see the mother as being all good or all bad at one moment in time (splitting) but, somewhere around the age of two, the child becomes able to integrate these parts and see that the mother has both good and bad qualities at the same time. These good and the bad objects developed in infancy are thought to influence long-term personality development, and what an individual from then on sees as 'good' and 'bad,' by means of the process called identification. Kelly construed identification as setting up a new construct in which a person, say mother, anchors the construct *similar to mother* v. *not similar to mother*, with the self classified at the former pole. However, we may also use identification in the traditional psychoanalytic sense of taking in a complete construct used by, say, a parent. A parent may use the construct *intelligent-stupid* frequently, and the child may introject this construct. Thus, one source of constructs may be introjection. Furthermore, the good and bad objects, as conceptualized in Fairbairn's theory, may also form constructs or the poles of objects.

John Bowlby (1982) put forth a theory of attachment between parent and child based on the child's instinctual motivation for survival. Somewhat similar to Kelly, Bowlby acknowledged the importance of "working models" in conceptualizing how an infant develops an attachment to a caregiver. He suggested that an infant needs to keep the working model in his mind "up-to-date" by taking in all of the necessary pieces of information from his surroundings, including those related to his caregiver. Bowlby believed that only occasionally do these

working models related to attachment undergo “major change,” implying that they remain relatively constant unless there is some “radical” change perceived in the environment, such as the loss of a loved one (p. 80-82).

After observing mothers separate and then reunite with their infants in laboratory and home settings, Ainsworth (2000), a student of John Bowlby, distinguished between three types of attachment. The first pattern has been labeled *secure attachment* in which the child uses the mother as a “secure base from which to explore” his or her surroundings. The child is happily able to play on his or her own when mother is present because she creates a feeling security. When the mother leaves, the child is at first distressed and then seeks comfort from her when she returns. The second pattern of attachment is typically referred to as *insecure resistant or ambivalent*. This is when the child becomes extremely distressed during separation from the mother and appears to seek close contact when she returns, yet resists the mother’s attempts at closeness. The third pattern of attachment is usually called *insecure avoidant* in which the child does not seem very distressed when separated from his or her mother and appears to ignore the mother when reunited (Ainsworth, 2000).⁸

There have been several studies that show a relationship between early attachments to parents and later attachments to significant others in adulthood. In light of Kelly’s theory, it is certainly plausible that the attachment pattern individuals develop in childhood may affect the constructs they develop about relationships. If during childhood one gets used to a certain pattern of emotional closeness between himself and a significant other, it may be that he will then predict that other significant relationships will follow a similar pattern, and he may adopt his behavior accordingly. For example, in Bowlby’s own words,

... a young child’s experience of an encouraging, supportive, and co-operative mother, and a little later father, gives him

a sense of worth, a belief in the helpfulness of others, and a favourable model on which to build future relationships. Furthermore, by enabling him to explore his environment with confidence and to deal with it effectively, such experience promotes his sense of competence (1982, p. 378).

Parenting styles, such as authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent and neglectful (Maccoby & Martin, 1983) may also play a role in shaping the child’s constructs. Kelly recognized that, if we fail to meet another person’s expectations, our self-construct is affected even if we did not agree with the other’s expectation to begin with. Kelly said that this is a potent process during childhood based on our parents’ expectations of us (Kelly, 1955, p. 177). Therefore, some of our constructs may be based on our parents’ own constructs, especially our self construct based on our evaluation of how well we have met, and continue to meet, our parents’ expectations of us, as well as how much love and support we receive from them. Other relatives, peers, teachers and people in the media may also play a role here.

More recent work on attachment would generate more suggestions but, as can be seen from these few brief examples, any psychological theory of development can provide suggestions for the content of the constructs that people develop, and the ways in which their constructs may change over time. Kelly, however, in his statement of his theory was not overly concerned with the specific types of constructs used by people, that is, the actual words used to anchor the constructs, words such as *intelligent vs stupid*. Kelly proposed no constructs common to all individuals. The present paper disagrees with this position and proposes that some constructs may be common because of the inevitable stages we move through as children and because of situational forces (from significant others and from the culture).⁹

Of course, some of the authors mentioned above emphasize the primacy of early expe-

⁸ A fourth attachment pattern called *insecure disorganized/disoriented* has been identified by Main and Solomon (1986).

⁹ A social constructivist position would be relevant to this latter situation (Butt, 2004).

periences which is not necessary in a personal construct theory of development, where the principle of *constructive alternativism* (similar to the existential psychological concept of *reframing*) permits reorganization of cognitive material into new structures which may be independent of earlier interpretations. However, the developmental psychologists mentioned above were cited only to provide examples of how such theories might provide suggestions for commonalities in the content of people's constructs.

Critical Question 9:

Are there commonalities in the content of constructs of people that can be related to the classic stage theories of development?

THE ROLE OF ANXIETY

Mehrabian proposed that a high level of cognitive differentiation would lead to a more accurate predictive ability. Kelly proposed that, on the whole, people try to extend and refine their construction system, and refinement means making it a more accurate predictor of events. Since anxiety is aroused by the inability to construe a situation, maturity should be accompanied by lower levels of anxiety at any given level of dilation/construction of the perceptual field.

Although individuals are, in Kelly's theory, motivated to extend and refine their construction system, not all individuals are willing to dilate their perceptual field, thereby gaining new experiences which force them in this direction. However, there are many transitions in life that do force these situations upon the individual, situations such as going off to school, moving from high school to university, leaving one's parents' home, getting married, getting divorced, and falling ill. If individuals are prepared to cope with these transitions, then their construction systems will move to a higher level of development. If, on the other hand, the transition is too difficult for them (perhaps the level of anxiety aroused is too high), then they may withdraw into a safer (more predictable world), thereby regressing to or fixating at a lower level of development. Mehrabian suggested the common

U-shaped function for this, that is, development proceeds best when the level of anxiety aroused by transition is at an intermediate level.

CAUSALITY

We now come to the most important lacuna in Personal Construct Psychology. What factors affect, for example, whether constructs become impermeable rather than permeable, tight rather than loose, or propositional rather than constellatory. What experiences leads individuals to dilate their perceptual field as a rule rather than to constrict their perceptual field as a rule? Why are some individual hostile while others modify their construction system given feedback?

Are there genetic and neurophysiological factors that determine these styles, psychodynamic-relevant experiential factors from the early years, the history of rewards and punishments (as in classic learning theory), or situational factors (interpersonal, subcultural or cultural)? These issues have been relatively ignored in Personal Construct Theory, but they are important, even crucial, for the development of a more encompassing theory of personal constructs. A provocative way of phrasing this issue is to ask the question, how would we raise a person so that they developed some trait or style. For example, how could we set out to raise a person who constricted their perceptual field or who was unable ever to loosen their construing, on so on.

Critical Question 10:

What factors (neurophysiological, experiential or contextual) result in (or cause) the individual's particular phenomenological state (such as permeable versus impermeable constructs, refusal to accept disconfirming evidence, dilating versus constricting, etc.)

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present paper has been to review writing on developmental aspects of George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory and to pro-

vide some hypotheses for developmental processes. We have explored how Heinz Werner's general theory of development can provide some hypotheses, and we have illustrated how theories of human developmental can provide suggestions as to how constructs and systems of constructs can change and how early, formative influences can affect the development of constructs and their properties. We have also identified major omissions in Personal Construct Theory, namely (1) extending the study of changes in constructs from adolescence through to old age and (2) identifying *causes* of the properties proposed by Personal Construct Theory for constructs, systems of constructs, the perceptual field and phenomenological states such as threat, anxiety, aggression and hostility.

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