Socio-Cultural Implications of Personal Construct Psychology

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Abstract

Personal construct psychology models human behavior and cognition as manifestations of an individual's processes for anticipating events. The detailed theory focuses on the nature and dynamics of these individual processes but it makes provision for the modeling of group activities through the commonality and sociality corollaries. If one person employs a construction of experience similar to another then her or his psychological processes will be similar. If one person construes the construction processes of another then she or he can play a role in a social process involving the other. Much human socio-cultural experience is designed to develop such commonality in construction and the capability to construe the processes of others. This article explores socio-cultural models of group, organizational and societal processes based on the foundations of personal construct psychology. In particular, it analyzes the constructs of major systemic sociologists such as those underlying Gidden's (1979) notion of a *locale,* an environment providing affordances for certain forms of social behavior, and those underlying Luhman's (1995, orig.1984) notions of socialization.

1 Introduction

In his development of personal construct psychology Kelly emphasizes that it is fundamentally a theory of "the individual person rather than any part of the person, any groups of persons or any particular process manifested in the person's behavior" (Kelly, 1955). The term *personal scientist* was coined (Shaw, 1980) to capture the core notions of his individuality and experience corollaries that our construct systems evolve idiosyncratically through our personal experience. However, Kelly's emphasis above does not indicate that personal construct psychology fails to provide foundations for a theory of roles, groups and behavior—it most assuredly does through the fragmentation and sociality corollaries and through the fundamental postulate. His message is that we not need to bring any prior notions of roles, group processes and behavioral dynamics to the foundations of psychology. These are all secondary notions that may be derived from the foundations, as may many other psychological phenomena such as motivation and learning.

In his own work Kelly focused on the individual aspects of personal construct psychology. As a therapist and a teacher it was the individual that was his primary focus, and he was not particularly concerned to develop his theory as a framework for other theories and notions. He was content that those other theories and notions were unnecessary for his purposes—he did not need to go outside personal construct psychology to understand and manage any aspect of human behavior, and did not wish to blur his vision through the lenses of others.

However, some 40 years after his seminal work the other theories and notions persist, and personal construct psychology has had remarkably little influence on them. In particular, social

and cultural studies show little influence from the clear and cogent systemic foundations for all aspects of human experience that personal construct psychology provides. In his rejection of functionalism in sociology Giddens adopts a position which is, in part, very close to that of Kelly: “According to the theory of structuration, social systems have no purpose, reasons or needs whatsoever; only human individuals do so. Any explanation of social reproduction which imputes teleology to social systems must be declared invalid” (Giddens, 1979). However, what this comment misses is Kelly’s insight that human individuals do not need to have purposes, reasons or needs ascribed to them either. These are constructs through which we model, and communicate about, the activities of ourselves and others, but they are not in themselves the foundations for those activities. Any explanation which imputes teleology to psychological systems must also be declared invalid.

Systemic sociologists need a systemic psychology on which to base their detailed models of social processes. Luhmann recognizes the potential of personal construct psychology in his analysis of socialization: “In reaction to a socialization process steered—but not determined!—by difference, the psychic system develops a difference trigger. A psychological theory adequate to this has been worked out by George A. Kelly” (Luhmann, 1995). Luhmann’s theory of education, for example, based on these insights is congruent with that of personal construct psychology but he does not develop the depth of analysis possible through detailed construction of his own system within the constructivist framework.

This presentation is concerned with the socio-cultural aspects of personal construct psychology and with the implications of the commonality and sociality corollaries for the systemic foundations of Giddens’ and Luhmann’s sociological systems. It explores the relations between constructs and communication from both theoretical and practical perspectives and focuses, in particular, on Giddens’ notion of a *locale* as the frame providing affordances for specific patterns of socialized behavior.

2 The Core Constructs of Personal Construct Psychology

Much of the commentary from social scientists on personal construct psychology has focused on Kelly’s form of constructivism, and the nature of constructs as he defines them, but has neglected to examine in depth its roots in his fundamental postulate, “A person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events”. Kelly emphasizes that his making anticipation the basis of psychology “is a drastic step indeed” and, through detailed examples, confirms his intention to demonstrate that anticipation alone is an adequate foundation for modeling all aspects of human being.

It is important to read no more into the fundamental postulate than Kelly states. For example, Gergen manages to impute a realist stance to personal construct psychology through Kelly’s statement that the choice of constructs “favors the alternative which seems to provide the best basis for anticipating ensuing events”, noting that this shows a healthy respect for “the world as it is”. However, there is nothing in the fundamental postulate to indicate that the events being anticipated arise from a pre-existent world. Construction can be an active process that creates events that would not have occurred without it, and whose source is the act of construction not any pre-existent world. There is no better basis for anticipation than the self-fulfilling prophesy of knocking the world into the shape that one anticipates. The templates that one fits to the world

are not just those of the imagination but also those of physical and verbal action, of the substance of the world and of human discourse.

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Research Objectives

Is it possible to develop social science based on Kelly's fundamental postulate, corollaries and definitions?

> *"A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events"*

That is, how much of the foundations of psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and so on, can be developed from a theory of anticipatory agents?

We need operational definitions in PCP terms of:

action, learning,
emotion, flow,
affordance, locale,
power, trust, money,
society, community,
culture, role, identity,
post-modernism, collective

and other such fundamental constructs of the social sciences.

This presentation attempts to define such constructs in terms of personal construct psychology.

Constructs as Actions

Kelly defines "construing" as the basis of anticipation through the construction corollary:

> *"A person anticipates events by construing their replications"*

Anticipation subsumes both prediction and action. **Prediction** is a process of passive construing that attempts to anticipate without interaction. **Action** is a process of active construing that attempts to impose anticipations.

> There is no better basis for anticipation than the self-fufilling prophecy of knocking the world into the shape one anticipates.

Powers (1973) put this well in his analysis of behavior as *"the control of perception"*

A key insight from his studies is that emitted behavior need not be determined by desired anticipations and plans based upon them.

> An effective strategy may be to disturb the environment and cease when the anticipation is fulfilled.

A personal construct psychology analysis of action is:

> action is anticipation through the control of construction.

Learning

Kelly captured the notion of learning in the experience corollary:

> *"A person's construction of experience varies as he successively construes the replications of events"*

Noting that *"the unit of experience is a cycle embracing 5 phases: anticipation, investment, encounter, confirmation or disconfirmation, and constructive revision"*

Reflective Equilibrium

Confirmation/disconfirmation play an interesting role in PCP since they are not absolutes but involve personal choice in the construction of events that may confirm/disconfirm anticipations.

This is equivalent to Goodman's (1973) use of Rawl's notion of 'reflective equilibrium' to model induction—we can change the construct system to make a different anticipation or change the construction of events to one that confirms the anticipation.

Kelly indicates a basis for such choice in the choice corollary

> *"A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for the elaboration of his system*

Surprise

Confirmation/disconfirmation is an analog dimension in that an event generates a degree of surprise relative to its anticipation.

Surprise may be defined as -ln(p) where p is the anticipated probability of the event.

Complete certainty leads to zero surprise if it is correct and infinite surprise if it is incorrect, but most anticipation is not completely certain and leads to intermediate values.

Flow

The optimum level of surprise is not zero.
Gaines (1997) shows that an error rate in anticipation between 20% and 80% leads to the maximum rate of learning.

This corresponds to Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) notion of 'flow' as

"optimal experience..when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable"

In PCP terms, flow corresponds to

the exertion of choice to manage anticipation between states of excessively high confirmation (boredom) and excessively low confirmation (anxiety) to achieve the most rapid elaboration of one's construct system.

Emotion

Melges analyzed emotions in terms of anticipation:

> *"the normal function of emotions is to attune the person to discrepancies between the present and the future so that he adjusts his plans of action to his future images"*

Kelly analyzed emotions in terms of positive ones emerging from confirmation of construing and negative ones from disconfirmation.

McCoy's (1981) taxonomy of emotions derives from our constructions of the ensuing changes in our construct systems.

A personal construct analysis of emotion is:

> emotions are the constructions placed upon surprise.

Affordances

Gibson (1979) coined the term 'affordance' to denote features in an environment that facilitate specific behaviors in an animal.

"The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal"

The notion is useful in capturing the way in which an environment created through the anticipations of one or more people can influence the anticipations of another group of people.

In PCP terms, affordances are ways of communicating constructs through actions on the environment.

Since an affordance channels anticipations in the same way as a construct system channels anticipations,

affordances embed constructs in the environment.

Locales

Following Goffman's (1974) 'frame analysis', Giddens (1979) captures the way in which environments are characterized by their modes of utilization in human activity in his notion of a 'locale' as:

"the use of space to provide the setting of interaction"

A locale provides affordances supporting and promoting social interaction and may be analyzed in PCP terms as:

a locale is a space with an embedded construct system.

Society and Community

Kelly defines social processes through the sociality corollary:

> *"To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another he may play a role in a social process involving the other person"*

The communication of constructs is the way in which a social system such as a society or community operates.

We have to be careful in the analysis of the constructs of society and community because they can be seen as polar opposites (Nisbet, 1966):

> *"community refers to social bonds characterized by emotional cohesion, depth, continuity and fullness"*
>
> *"society is the large-scale impersonal, contractual ties that were proliferating in the modern age"*

In terms of the previous analysis we may define:

a community is a collection of people whose social interaction is mediated primarily by the direct communication of constructs;

a society is a collection of people whose social interaction is mediated primarily by the indirect communication of constructs through locales.

Culture

Kelly analyzes culture in terms of:

> *"what the individual anticipates others will do and, in turn, what he thinks they are expecting him to do"*

Hence, a PCP definition of a culture is:

> membership in a culture is delimited by the mutual anticipations that members of a culture construe as defining it.

Anthropologists emphasize the dynamic nature of cultures whereby processes of acculturation induct new members. Hence:

> a culture intrinsically involves the communication of constructs, for example through the operation of a community or a society.

Role

There is generally more than one set of mutual anticipations delimiting membership in a culture.

> The construct systems supporting each set of mutual anticipations delimiting membership in a culture define roles within that culture.

Power

The notion of power in sociology is one of an agent being able to influence or control the behavior of another agent.

A personal construct psychology analysis of power is:

> power is the potential of one agent to influence or control the anticipations of another agent.

It is interesting to examine this in terms of the sociality corollary:

> *"To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another he may play a role in a social process involving the other person"*

One aspect of power is thus the capability to involve others in social processes.

Money

Economic aspects of social systems may be analyzed in terms of power by noting that 'money' is a mechanism for storing and transmitting power.

A personal construct psychology analysis of money ~~is~~:

> money is a means to store and transmit the potential to influence or control the anticipations of another agent.

Trust

The notion of trust in sociology is one of an agent relying on the behavior of another agent.

A personal construct psychology analysis of trust is:

> trust is the willingness of one agent to rely on the anticipations of another agent.

Power-Trust Trade-off

A trade-off between trust and power is apparent in that an agent who can rely on the anticipations of another agent does not need to use power to influence or control those anticipations.

These considerations provide a bridge between Luhman's (1979) systemic notion that trust is a mechanism for *simplifying social interaction* & Fukuyama's (1997) economic notion that trust is a mechanism for *reducing transaction costs*.

> The simplification of social interaction resulting from trust reduces the need to use power to control the anticipations of another agent, in many circumstances through the use of power stored in the form of money.

Collective

The construal of a community or society as an individual has a recurrent attraction but its value is often disputed.

McDougall's (1920) analysis of collectives in terms of a 'group mind' was refuted by Allport (1924) as having only 'descriptive' rather than 'explanatory' power.

However, Allport only accepted reductionist explanations.

From a PCP perspective, the construal of a social system as an individual has merit if it improves our anticipation of that system.

For example, there may be properties of the system as a whole that emerge from social interactions but cannot be attributed to particular individuals within it.

From a 'collective stance' (Gaines, 1994) we can construe a social system as an anticipatory system analogous to a person, and apply the fundamental postulate, rephrased:

"a community's processes are socially channelized by the ways in which it anticipates events"

Thus, there is the possibility of a sociology based on the extension of Kelly's systemic framework to collectives.