

# Kelly's theory of constructive alternativism

By Kendra Pinder

George Kelly through treatment and research of Arkansas farming families during a depression realised that because of varying cultures and backgrounds, one basic psychological technique that was applied time and again by many psychologists, In this case The Freudian Psychosexual theory had no true basis in treating these all people. But what this did do was allow Kelly to formulate his theory of Constructive Alternativism. This theory was based upon the idea that, while there is only one true reality, reality is always experienced from one or another perspective.

What was realised by Kelly was that every individual acts, reacts and behaves according to how they view their own reality. Each person views another or an event in an entirely different way to anyone else. But what forms that basic reality was of course needed to be understood.

Kelly came to the conclusion that we all are mini scientists. Our entire life consists of us formulating our own hypotheses, carrying out various experiments, searching for answers, and concluding our experiments when an answer is gained. Whether this was by self or from an external source was irrelevant, the prime directive was to gain an answer to our initial question. Once this was done we were able to store this information and apply this to other scenarios and events in our lives, believing that to be true until an alternative answer was gained.

What also Kelly found interesting, was how individuals accepted so readily answers given to them by professionals such as him, even if the answer being given had absolutely no bearing on that individual's life. This he concurred was because there perception of a professional was of an intelligent individual who held the answers to there questions. Regardless whether or not the answers were sustainable or correct within their reality, they accepted the explanations all the same, and that they did make positive progress within there meetings with Kelly and his team.

This proving that indeed we are all searching for answers to our own personal theories. The answers to an outcome, how we act, react to an event depends foremost upon our own initial perception of that event. And of course up until that point, Kelly confirms we can only perceive an event in one way, that with which a similar events came about and had previously concluded.

As an individual develops throughout their childhood, to begin with they believe the world works in such a way, and what their place within that world is. As time goes by, some of what that child believes to be true (their personal constructs) will change (constructs of transition) by that child's own experiences or by witnessing these changes within the world they observe. Depending on what changes they experience etc, whether of a negative nature or positive one, these transitions will have an overall affect on that person as they mature to adulthood and how they perceive their adult world to be.

When an individual's personal constructs do not match what they have preconceived them to be, or should be that individual reacts. That individual will become anxious because things quite literally are not going as they believe they should. If this is regarding something extremely important in that person's life, their career, children, and marriage (a person's core constructs)

Those unprecedented changes then become a threat. And rather than simply causing anxiety, this causes fear.

When an individual when acting against their own core constructs, they feel a sense of guilt, regardless whether they are correct to feel this or not. They will feel this emotion because they are viewing their part within their reality, that situation as not going quite right, or that they could have behaved differently at that time.

So Kelly's theory regarding personality, behaviour, reactions and interactions, is based on each individual having their own personal constructs of how life should be. Of how events should conclude, and how they as individuals react, interact and behave within that reality.

A personality/behaviour disorder according to Kelly, is when an individual continually goes against their basic constructs, even though validation of what they are doing is wrong is repeated time and again. This Kelly calls this a broken construct, and he suggests that each individual has the ability to change their lives simply by changing the perception of their reality.

Overall Kelly's theory suggests that each individuals development, behaviour and personality is determined by what answers we receive to our own little theories when growing up. In other words, we gain answers from our parents and from our environment and those as time goes by do change. Individuals do not take on personality traits of others; they simply take on board how others react etc within that child's environment. So regardless of an individual's upbringing, they will form their own unique personality and behaviour traits based upon what they view is correct or not within their own personal constructs.

If this theory is correct then regardless of our home life when developing as children, by understanding what was correct or not within our childhood in later life, our overall personalities should not be affected adversely in any way.

But research undertaken by Chassin Curran, Hussong and Colder on alcoholism within families in 1996 would seem to oppose Kelly's theory on self constructed personality traits. They found that though the actual act of alcoholism within a household from one or both parents did not increase the chance of alcoholism within their children. It was the lack of nurturing and parental monitoring that would more likely lead the child later in life onto the alcoholic route, and in turn would lead them to continue the cycle of abuse and lack of monitoring within their own households and families. Even though when questioned as part of the research, the subjects themselves were opposed to how they had been treated as children, and how they themselves would have preferred a more stable upbringing with more attention from their parent/parents. Regardless that the individuals themselves were more than aware of the abuse and lack of involvement from their parent/parents, they themselves had continued that cycle. Other psychologists such as John Bowlby state that there is a biologically basis and instinctive need by children to build attachments to their parents and care givers. So how an individual's father viewed life, their attitude and reactions in adult years would mimic that of their father's personality.

**Evaluation** – Kelly's theory certainly does seem to hold weight in regards to changing behaviour, and how we as individuals build the basis of our personalities upon. But the research of Chassin Curran, Hussong and Colder shows that even though a child growing up within an alcoholic household, knew certain behaviour and personality traits of their parents were wrong, yet choose to continue this cycle within their own lives and affect

their own children in such a way. Kelly would suggest that this is an individual's broken construct, but the individuals concerned knew this construct was an incorrect one, and though regardless they could indeed see the reality of their childhood in a different way. This in itself changed nothing. Bowlby's attachment theory also shows time and again, how as individuals we do aspire to be like those that are closest to us in childhood. To gain another's approval would be to mirror them, their personality traits and behaviour. A parent it would seem does indeed have a huge impact on our overall personality and behaviour traits. If Kelly's theory is wholly correct, then surely it would not matter if a parent was an alcoholic, or by their lack of nurturing it would affect an individual in such a way as to continue that abusive and self destructive cycle that individual would recognise and acknowledge that situation to be incorrect and should then aspire to change that within his or her life/reality. .

From childhood if Kelly is correct, we are constantly theorising and finding answers to questions. This in itself has to start from a foundation; this would be within our childhood years. So Bowlby's attachment theory and Chassin Curran, Hussong and Colder's research certainly would come into affect here. To dismiss an individual's childhood would seem to do so at our peril. But also to dismiss Kelly's theory of initiating change by understanding what went wrong could only benefit the individual's future.

It would appear that we certainly should not dismiss what inherent traits and attachments that have already been formed, but also look at recognising and building upon them, as with Kellian therapy apply a different view point, maybe gaining differing answers to what was originally perceived to be true. This in itself can bring about positive change, but only if the root of each individual's behaviour/perception is acknowledged, recognising both the positive and negative affects of an individual's past as a map to show them how to change their future.

## **Bibliography**

[www.coursework.info/University/Biological\\_Sciences/Psychology/Social\\_Psychology/Alcoholism\\_In\\_Young\\_Age\\_L93791.html](http://www.coursework.info/University/Biological_Sciences/Psychology/Social_Psychology/Alcoholism_In_Young_Age_L93791.html)

M.W.Eyssen, **2006**, Psychology for AS Level, Third edition, Sussex, Psychology press

Gross, **2005**, psychology the science of behaviour, fifth edition, Dubai, Hodder education