

MEANINGFULNESS OF PERSONAL VERSUS COMMON CONSTRUCTS

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In the present study, we are concerned with checking a general hypothesis derivable from Kelly's theory (4) that one's personal language dimensions or Personal Constructs, as elicited by the Role Construct Repertory Test, RCRT (1, 4), are more meaningful than other kinds of language. Personal Constructs refer to the system of dichotomous contrasts employed by an individual as he tries to comprehend and organize his experience. Basically, a Personal Construct may be defined as the way in which a person understands two things as being alike and different from a third. In other words, a Personal Construct is not defined by Kelly as *just* an object, event, or group of objects and events, but rather it is defined by inclusion, exclusion and antithesis. For example, a person may be asked to state how his brother and his sister are similar in some way that distinguishes them from his mother. The response that brother and sister are *modern* and mother is *old-fashioned* would be considered a verbalized construct.

Sometimes, the ways in which people contrast social events are most peculiar. In the present investigation, several subjects contributed the following personal contrasts: weakling vs. hypoactive; home loving vs. dependable; forthright vs. folksy; soft spoken vs. plain; musical vs. "tyrantish." In other studies, some of the following appeared: sloping in vs. sloping out; loving vs. dumb; mean vs. studious; foolish vs. reasonable. That such contrasts may be viewed as antithetical was supported in a study by Resnick and Landfield (10).

Kelly posits the Personal Construct (PC) as the basic unit of understanding and then suggests a test of meaningfulness when he states, "If a person sets up the construct of black vs white; an object cannot for him, be both black and white. The construct tends to force upon him either one or the other of two alternatives. If it were not so, the construct would have no meaning" (4, pp. 65-66). The criterion of meaningfulness which we have deduced from the above statements, as well as from the general theory, is that one rates more

extremely on those dimensions which are most meaningful. Since Kelly's PCs are assumed to be basic constructions of communication, they should pass Kelly's extremity test of meaningfulness.

Three studies published recently have dealt with the importance of rating extremity. Cromwell and Caldwell (3) using Kelly's RCRT elicited PC dimensions from *Ss* who then were asked to do ratings of six acquaintances on their own and others' PC dimensions. It was found that more extreme ratings are done when *Ss* describe acquaintances on their own PC dimensions. This result follows from Kelly's theory, supporting the idea that one's own constructs are more meaningful to oneself than those belonging to others.

A second study, by Landfield (5), suggests that personal meaningfulness may be related to extremity of rating. Clients in psychotherapy were given the opportunity to rank-order the importance of a mixture of PC dimensions derived from their own RCRT protocols and protocols of their respective therapists. Ranking choice was based on felt usefulness in describing others. In addition to rank-ordering, clients did self ratings on their own and their therapist's dimensions. First, it was found that at the beginning of therapy the five top-chosen constructs were more likely to be those of the client, the bottom five those of the therapist. Second, disregarding whether constructs belonged to client or therapist, the five top-chosen constructs showed greater rating extremity than bottom-ranked constructs. Finally, the clients' present self and ideal-self ratings on their own constructs were more extreme than their ratings on their therapist's constructs.

A third study (9) focused on the prediction of premature and non-premature terminators in psychotherapy. PCs were elicited from clients and their therapists. These constructs were used as polarities on an Osgood-type scale (8). The client described the role of his therapist on his own and his therapist's dimensions. The therapist described his client on his own and his client's dimensions. Extremeness of rating from the mid-point of the scale was used as a measure of meaningfulness. Our hypothesis, which was supported, stated that, at the beginning of psychotherapy, premature terminators would rate their therapists less extremely than would non-premature terminators, and the therapists would rate their premature terminators less extremely than they would rate their non-premature terminators. Finally, it was shown that this hypothesis is supported more strongly when tested in relationship to one's own PC dimensions. To under-

stand therapists and clients within their own language dimensions greatly increased the significance of results.

In the present study, it was hypothesized that *Ss* will do more extreme self ratings within their own PC language than within the more generalized language of the Butler-Haigh (BH) Q-sort statements (2). It was reasoned that BH language, generalizations from statements made by students undergoing psychotherapy, would be less relevant for describing the self than PC language which was elicited from each *S* and used by him. The greater relevance and meaningfulness of PC language would be shown by more extreme ratings. Further, it was hypothesized that more PC language than BH language would be accepted as highly descriptive of the self.

PROCEDURE

Ss were recruited on a voluntary basis from undergraduate classes in psychology and education at the University of Missouri. Ninety-nine *Ss* were given the RCRT. Those *Ss* were retained who produced 15 different PCs from 25 comparisons of acquaintances. Forty-nine *Ss* failed to give 15 different constructs, and 10 additional *Ss* failed to appear for the remainder of the study, leaving 40 *Ss* in the final study.

The 15 bi-polar PCs for each *S* then were taken and placed on 3" x 5" cards, one polar end of a dimension on each card. For example, the personal contrast of friendly would be placed on one card and the other contrast, which might be unfriendly, withdrawn, or whatever the *S* had placed on the RCRT, would be placed on another card, etc. Furthermore, these PC descriptions were changed to self-referent statements. For example, friendly would be altered to read, "I am friendly."

The 30 PC statements (15 constructs) for a particular *S* were shuffled together with the 74 BH statements. Each *S* then was asked to Q-sort BH and his own PC statements on a nine-category scale from *least like me* to *most like me*. The following are examples of the BH statements: I often feel humiliated; I am shy; I am likeable; I am ambitious.

Three weeks after the first complete testing with the 40 *Ss*, the ratings of PC and BH statements were redone to check on the short-term reliability of rating. Pearsonian reliability correlation coefficients for PC and BH were .82 and .79, respectively.

RESULTS

The number of BH and PC statements for cards sorted in each of nine categories of the nine-point scale from *most like me* to *least like me* were counted. Since there were 30 PC cards and 74 BH cards, percentages were calculated. The percentage of BH and PC cards in each category, one through nine, was calculated for each *S*. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was first applied to determine whether the overall distributions between BH and PC sortings were significantly different. Maximum difference between the distributions on the first

testing was 15.51%, $p < .001$, on the second testing three weeks later, was 14.41%, $p < .001$. A two-tailed test was used.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF SUBJECTS ($N = 40$) PUTTING AT LEAST 50% OF PERSONAL-CONSTRUCT (PC) AND BUTLER-HAIGH (BH) ITEMS IN INDICATED CLASS INTERVALS

| | | Least like me (0-2) | Mid-range (3-5) | Most like me (6-8) | Mid-range plus Least like me (0-5) | Mid-range plus Most like me (3-8) |
|--------|----|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Test 1 | PC | 1 | 17 | 22 | 18 | 39 |
| | BH | 5 | 34 | 1 | 39 | 35 |
| Test 2 | PC | 0 | 17 | 23 | 17 | 40 |
| | BH | 9 | 28 | 3 | 37 | 31 |

Even though PC and BH distributions were significantly different, it was important to know whether a few or many *Ss* contributed to this difference. Therefore, a four-cell chi square with 1 df was computed on the number of *Ss* putting at least 50% (arbitrary cut-off point) of PC and BH statements in extreme categories. Table 1 shows that 23 *Ss*, at first testing, used at least 50% of their PCs in extreme categories, either 0-2 or 6-8. Seventeen *Ss*, at first testing, used at least 50% of their PCs in the mid-range category, 3-5. Six *Ss*, at first testing, used the extremes for their BH statements, whereas 34 used the mid-range. Twice as many *Ss* used the mid-range category when rating BH statements. The more extreme use of PCs than BHs was supported, $\chi^2 = 15.6$, $p < .001$, at first testing, and $\chi^2 = 6$, $p < .02$, at second testing.

At first testing, 22 *Ss* used at least 50% of their PCs as *most like me*; 18 *Ss*, at mid-range (3-5) or at the *least like me* extreme (0-2). Only one *S* used at least 50% of the BH statements as *most like me*, while 39 *Ss* used at least 50% of the BH statements either at mid-range or the *least like me* extreme. The more extreme use of PCs as *most like me* was supported: $\chi^2 = 26.6$, $p < .001$. At second testing, a similar distribution in favor of PCs was also supported: $\chi^2 = 22.8$, $p < .001$.

Since more extreme use of PC statements might be related to greater inherent extremity, 13 additional undergraduate *Ss* were asked to rate a mixture of PC and BH statements as *extreme*, *somewhat extreme*, *a little extreme*, or *not at all extreme*. Only one *S* rated at least

50% of the PCs as *extreme* or *somewhat extreme*. Two Ss rated the BHs as extreme or somewhat extreme. These data do not support greater inherent extremity of the PCs.

The question of whether the difference in usage of PC and BH extreme categories can be accounted for on the basis of the positive or negative connotations of the statements was answered in a second control study. Twenty-one undergraduates from a psychology course were asked to rate the 74 BH statements and a sample of 200 PC statements chosen at random from the PCs given by the original Ss. The Ss followed these instructions: "Read carefully each of the following statements. Assume that you have made each of these statements about yourself. If you think the statement represents a good characteristic when applied to yourself, place a + sign in the blank preceding the statement. If you think the statement is bad when applied to yourself, place a - sign in the blank."

Seventy percent of the Ss had to agree to the positive or negative valence of each statement in order for it to be considered in the analysis. Eighty percent of both the BH and the PC statements passed the 70% criterion. Of the 59 BH statements reaching the criterion, 46% were rated as positive. Of the 161 PC statements included in the analysis, 60% were regarded as positive. We then checked back to see where the original 40 Ss had placed these items on the *least like me—most like me* scale. Assuming that the original Ss regarded these items (in terms of + or -) in the same way as the controls, it was found that the negative PC items were more acceptable as part of the self than negative BH items. Of negatively judged PC items 15% were rated in the *most like me* category, whereas none of the negatively judged BH items was rated in this category by the original Ss. Furthermore, Ss were more likely to admit that positive characteristics are least like them if couched in PC language than if stated in more generalized BH language. Of positively judged PC items 12% were rated in the *least like me* category, whereas 7% of the positively judged BH items were rated in this category by the original Ss.

These data give considerable support to the contention that one's own language is more acceptable to one than is the generalized language of others. That is, more negative constructs are accepted as part of the self if they are in the language of PCs, and furthermore, the lack of positive characteristics is more likely to be admitted if stated in the language of PCs.

DISCUSSION

The finding that PC items, particularly the negative ones, are more acceptable in describing the self, has important implications for psychotherapy. First, if the therapist wishes to help a client face certain negative characteristics within himself, it is best whenever possible to utilize the client's language of negative characteristics rather than insisting that the client accept the language of the therapist, as reflected in his personal and professional constructs. Second, the openness and willingness of the therapist to utilize the client's language, even that which is negative, should enable the client to feel more open to explore those characteristics which may have brought him into therapy. These inferences may be related to findings by Nawas and Landfield (7) and Landfield and Nawas (6). These studies suggest that most improved clients tend to make greater use of their own language toward the end of therapy than at the beginning. Also, identification with the therapist occurs more within the client's own language system than within the therapist's language system as used by the client.

This research supplies evidence for the contention that the Personal Construct should be understood as a basic unit of individual meaningfulness. Moreover, this particular study when integrated with some of the other studies which have been recently completed on the assessment of meaningfulness, strongly emphasizes the great importance of giving more attention to the kind of research which aims at getting at the individual's own system of meaning.

SUMMARY

Self ratings (qualities *least like me* and *most like me*) were done with Personal Construct (PC) descriptions (Kelly) and Butler-Haigh (BH) Q-sort statements. It was hypothesized that self ratings within the more *generalized* BH language would be less extreme than ratings within the more *personal* language elicited by Kelly's Role Construct Repertory Test. This hypothesis was supported in that ratings within PC language were found to be more extreme and skewed toward *most like me*, whereas BH piled up in the center of the distribution. This investigation not only supports the greater meaningfulness of one's own personal language for understanding oneself, but also highlights the importance for the therapist of utilizing a client's own language, particularly, as the client is confronted by certain negative characteristics of himself.

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