

Assessment: The Repertory Grid Technique

George Kelly made personal constructs the key concept in his theory of personality as well as the focus of his approach to psychotherapy. But this emphasis created a bit of a problem. Specifically, how does one go about measuring personal constructs? Of course, a therapist might obtain some idea of a client's construct system during therapy sessions. But Kelly and his colleagues needed an efficient way to identify personal constructs that could also be easily understood by clients. His solution was the *Repertory Grid Technique*.

Kelly and his followers developed several variations of this technique (Caputi, Viney, Walker, & Crittenden, 2012; Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2003), but the essential procedure consists of two steps (Bell, 1990). First, the test taker creates a list of *elements*. The items on this list can be anything the person encounters in life, but most often the list consists of specific people the test taker knows. Second, the test taker's personal constructs are elicited by comparing and contrasting various elements on the list.

The most common version of the grid technique is the *Role Construct Repertory Test*, more commonly known as the Rep Test. A shortened version of the basic Rep Test procedure is presented on pages 392–393. Therapists begin by asking clients to provide a list of 24 people from various personal experiences—for example, a teacher they liked, the most interesting person they know, and so on. The therapist then presents clients with three of the names from this list and asks, “In what important way are two of these people alike but different from the third?” A client might say that two of them are *warm* people and that the third person is *cold*. In Kelly's terms, this client has used a *warm–cold* construct to categorize the three people. The process is repeated with three different names from the list. Perhaps this time the client will divide the people along an *outgoing–shy* or a *generous–miserly* construct. Kelly suggested that about 20 trials, or “sorts,” provide the therapist with a useful sample of the client's principal constructs.

In one variation of the Rep Test, the therapist takes away one of the three names and replaces it with a new one. This procedure can be useful in identifying clients' difficulties in applying new constructs to new situations. To examine self-concepts, therapists sometimes present the client's name along with two names from the list. Again, clients are asked how two of the three are alike and one is different. In another variation of the procedure, therapists take the list of constructs generated from the client's initial Rep Test and ask the client to evaluate each person on the list according to the construct. This step creates a grid similar to the one shown in Table 15.3 and allows the therapist and client to look for patterns across a broad set of information.

The Repertory Grid Technique has been widely used by therapists and clinical psychologists to obtain a visual map of how clients and those suffering from various psychological disorders construe the world (Feixas, Erazo-Caicedo, Harter, & Bach, 2008; Winter, 2003). But the grid technique has also been used by researchers when studying such diverse topics as communication within a large organization (Coopman, 1997), teaching effectiveness (Chitsabesan, Corbett, Walker, Spencer, & Barton, 2006), profiles of specific criminal types (Horley, 1996), and career counseling

Table 15.3 Sample Grid

	Mom	Dad	Sister	Brother	Boss	Neighbor	Friend	Coworker	
Pleasant	P	U	U	U	U	U	P	U	Unpleasant
Trustworthy	U	U	U	U	U	U	?	U	Untrustworthy
Competitive	N	N	C	C	?	N	C	C	Not Competitive
Warm	W	C	C	C	C	C	?	C	Cold
Intelligent	N	I	I	I	I	?	N	I	Not Intelligent
Fun	D	D	D	D	D	D	F	D	Dull

(Savickas, 1997). Since its inception, researchers have conducted thousands of studies using variations of the Repertory Grid Technique (Neimeyer, 2001; Saul et al., 2012).

Like other assessment procedures, the grid technique also has its limitations. One concern is that, unlike other personality measures, the Repertory Grid Technique does not generate a simple test score. Although various number-generating systems have been developed, the procedure still allows for a large degree of interpretation on the part of the therapist. Another limitation concerns the many assumptions underlying the test. One assumption is that the constructs used during the test are relatively permanent. That is, we assume clients are not using these constructs for the first time in the testing session and never again. A related assumption is that the people on the list are representative of the kind of people clients are likely to deal with in their daily lives. Constructs used only for unique people that clients rarely encounter are of little use in understanding how clients deal with the majority of people with whom they interact.

ASSESSING YOUR OWN PERSONALITY

Personal Constructs

To begin, write down the names of the following 12 people. Although a person may fit more than one category, you need to compile a list of 12 different people. If there is no one who fits a category, name someone who is similar to the category description. For example, if you do not have a brother, select someone who is like a brother to you.

- _____ 1. A teacher you liked
- _____ 2. A teacher you disliked
- _____ 3. Your wife (husband) or boyfriend (girlfriend)
- _____ 4. An employer, supervisor, or officer you found hard to get along with
- _____ 5. An employer, supervisor, or officer you liked
- _____ 6. Your mother

- _____ 7. Your father
 _____ 8. Brother nearest your age
 _____ 9. Sister nearest your age
 _____ 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

Next, take three of these people at a time, as indicated by the numbers in the following list. Then describe in what important way two of them are alike but different from the third. Put a word or phrase describing the two similar people in the *Construct* list and a description of the remaining person in the *Contrast* list.

Names	Construct	Contrast
3, 6, 7	_____	_____
1, 4, 10	_____	_____
4, 7, 8	_____	_____
1, 6, 9	_____	_____
4, 5, 8	_____	_____
2, 11, 12	_____	_____
8, 9, 10	_____	_____
2, 3, 5	_____	_____
5, 7, 11	_____	_____
1, 10, 12	_____	_____

This is an abbreviated version of Kelly's Rep Test (the Minimum Context Form). The test provides a quick idea of the constructs you use to organize information about the people you know and meet. You may want to compare your responses with those of other test takers. No doubt you will find a few overlapping constructs, but also many you hadn't thought of. Of course, these differences in personal constructs represent differences in personality that should translate into individual differences in your behavior.

Scale: The Role Construct Repertory (Rep) Test

Source: The Role Construct Repertory (Rep) Test from *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs* by George A. Kelly. Copyright © 1955, 1963 by George A. Kelly, renewed 1983, 1991 by Gladys Kelly. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Kelly was particularly concerned about what he called the "most precarious" assumption underlying the procedure. That is, that people are able to describe the constructs they use. Kelly recognized that words may not exist to adequately describe many constructs. And even when clients find appropriate words, therapists may interpret those words differently. For example, a client's definition of aggressive may be quite different from a therapist's. In this case, the therapist would end up with a misleading impression of how the client views the world.

Strengths and Criticisms of the Cognitive Approach

Strengths

One strength of the cognitive approach to personality is that many of the ideas evolved out of and were developed through empirical research findings. Most of the cognitive structures used to account for individual differences have been subjected to extensive investigation in controlled laboratory experiments. In many cases, personality psychologists have borrowed ideas and research procedures from social and cognitive psychologists investigating similar phenomena. Moreover, cognitive models of personality have been modified as investigators learn more about cognitive structures and processes through their ongoing research.

Another strength of the cognitive approach is that it fits well with the current mood, or *Zeitgeist*, of psychology. The number of journal articles and doctoral dissertations examining cognitive concepts has risen dramatically over the past few decades. Researchers in other areas of psychology, such as developmental and social psychologists, are conducting research that often complements and extends what is known from the cognitive personality perspective. Related to the preceding point, cognitive approaches to psychotherapy have become particularly popular in recent years. Even therapists who identify with other approaches to personality sometimes incorporate aspects of cognitive therapy in their practice.

Criticisms

A frequent criticism of the cognitive approach is that the concepts are sometimes too abstract for empirical research. What exactly is a “personal construct” or a “possible self”? How do we know if a schema is being used? How many schemas are there, and how are they related? More important, how can we study their influence on behavior if we can’t agree on clear operational definitions? Some of the answers may come with more research, but the nature of cognitions probably renders them more nebulous than many constructs used by personality theorists.

A related question is whether we need to introduce these concepts to account for individual differences in behavior. For example, strict behaviorists might argue that they can explain the same phenomena with fewer constructs. Introducing schemas or possible selves may be unnecessary and perhaps even an obstacle to understanding personality. Applying the law of parsimony, it is incumbent upon cognitive theorists to demonstrate how their approach can explain personality better than other, less complicated approaches.

Another source of concern about the cognitive approach to personality is that there is no single model to organize and guide theory and research. Basic questions about how various cognitive structures relate to one another and to other aspects of information processing, such as memory, remain unanswered. A related problem concerns the relationship between the various cognitive structures introduced by researchers and theorists. Is a personal construct different from a schema? A comprehensive model would help researchers understand precisely what these terms mean and how they are related.

Summary

1. The cognitive approach to personality describes consistent behavior patterns in terms of the way people process information. George Kelly was an early pioneer in this approach with his personal construct theory. Kelly maintained that we are motivated to make sense out of our world. He compared people to scientists, always striving for better predictions about what will happen to them. Kelly described the cognitive structures we use in this regard as personal constructs. He maintained that psychological problems stem from anxiety, which results from a person's inability to predict events.
2. Psychologists have described a number of cognitive structures to help explain individual differences and intrapersonal processes. Perhaps the most important cognitive structures for personality psychologists are the cognitive representations we have for ourselves. Much research in this area is concerned with self-schemas. Studies demonstrate that we perceive information more readily and recall it better when it is relevant to our self-schemas. Researchers also find that cognitive representations of future selves often guide our behavior.
3. Cognitive approaches to psychotherapy have become increasingly popular in the last few decades. These therapies focus on changing the clients' thoughts. Albert Ellis, an early advocate of this approach, argued that people have emotional problems when they use irrational beliefs. Rational emotive therapy helps clients see how they rely on these beliefs and how to replace them with more rational ones.
4. Kelly introduced the Repertory Grid Technique to measure individual differences in personal constructs. In one example, test takers develop a list of people in their lives and then divide these people into various categories. This procedure helps therapists see the constructs clients use to make sense of the world. Kelly acknowledged several assumptions behind this approach, including that people can adequately communicate the constructs they use.
5. Among the strengths of the cognitive approach is its solid empirical background. The cognitive approach also fits nicely with the current trend in psychology toward cognitive explanations of behavior. Some critics of the cognitive approach have complained that many of the concepts used by cognitive theorists are too abstract. Others have questioned whether it is always necessary to introduce cognitions to explain behavior. The cognitive approach also suffers from the lack of a general model.

Key Terms

personal constructs (p. 377)

possible selves (p. 386)

rational emotive therapy
(p. 388)

self-schemas (p. 382)