

Reconstruing geographies and stories: The path of personal construct theory in the individual and cultural experience of its followers

Mara Ognibeni and Manola Alfredetti

School of Specialization in Constructivist Psychotherapy, CESIPc, Florence, Italy

To consider a psychological theory in its contingencies means to wonder how cultural, social and intellectual artefacts have been taken into account in developing certain kinds of ideas, of conceptions on the person, and on his or her way of construing and living his or her own existence. In this sense, we propose a re-reading of the development of Personal Construct Theory not under the point of view of its “self-supporting” formal and hypothetical aspects, or as an act of individual performance, but as a social activity conducted by multiple actors who have contributed—whether directly or indirectly—to reconfigure it. The approach we used consisted in reviewing the events concerning the theory formulated by Kelly, as it has been evolving during its successive re-examinations and reinterpretations, especially in the therapeutic field, considering them in a context of traditions and of complex steps of knowledge socialization. The reflection will focus on some epistemological issues and on their different professional implications.

Keywords: knowledge, radical constructivism, hermeneutic constructivism, personal construct theory

Among jazz musicians there is a saying that goes: “Your value is the one of your last performance”, meaning that one’s personal history and reputation are less important than the last displaying of one’s own skills. Could the same thing be stated about psychotherapists today?

In other words, does it make sense to deal with the actual issues of being a psychotherapist trying to observe this profession “backwards” and to find out what kind of progression and historical connection have led up to them? Do not cases and current practices already include what has been thought, learned, discussed, framed and analysed, as well as what has been excluded or became outdated? Why go back to it?

These questions touch the heart of the reflection of the current epistemology of knowledge that aims at having a professional relevance. Knowledge is still too often presented as a product rather than as a process: it is proposed as a structured and determined *corpus* that provides precise and indisputable answers and applications.

The non-inquiring nature of a certain way of telling theories, as well as the display of researches' results often leaving the reticular dimension out, based on the practice and the negotiation of the meanings which are produced and take shape in the course of the experience, increase the gap from that kind of practice which moves instead in the "swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution", as Schön (1983, p. 42) writes. When professionals at work present a structure of theorisations with traits of conclusiveness in their professional practice, and claim that their professional project is final, they stop considering their knowledge as their object of research, thus increasing irreconcilable ambivalences and contradictions. To set out static definitions is already the first step towards a mire of further static definitions which are sometimes characterised by previously established answers to obsolete questions, leaving unanswered the most authentic issues. To be aware of the bonds and peculiarities of the interactive history of professional practice and of theoretical reflections to fill the "social vacuum" in which ideas and techniques are often proposed, means instead to understand those practices in relation to cultural, social, scientific and epistemic systems through which the meaning and the shape itself of a profession emerges and is achieved.

The objective of a professional reflection should start from going beyond the places of proclamations in order to reach those places where dialogues move, where is possible to hear experiences, to understand what happened and how did we get where we are. Far from the archetype of linear transmission of knowledge, moving towards the ability to question about contexts, and relationships among circumstances and among various participants is what represents in our opinion an attempt to make our assumptions—existentially speaking—more dynamic, revisiting them starting from the knowledge-based configurations (Gius & Alfredetti, 2005).

For decades, in the phenomenological and constructivist tradition, the historical and social world, as well as the scientific one, have been regarded as not definable as a deployment of some a-priori rationality, but as the stratification of practices. Abstracting the action from its circumstances and representing it on a rational level implicates the loss of the active and joined dimension of related people: there where learning has to do more with participating in practices and experiences than with the disclosing of the abstract rationality of reality (Wenger, 1998).

From the point of view of cultural psychology there are no "natural" psychological processes, nor are they independent from the mediation of culture. Through such mediation, culture becomes "immediately and forever" an indispensable part of our psychological repertoire. Then, thinking about the different forms and the different developments of ideas – relating them to social and cultural mediation tools – becomes particularly interesting to understand the peculiarities and implications of certain perspectives. Mediation tools, material and ideal at the same time, bind but also allow the realization of psychological and cognitive practices. In this regard culture is not an independent variable, as it is naïvely asserted by a certain psychological tradition, but a feature of human psychological processes which is impossible to delete (Goodwin, 1994; Latour, 1986; Mantovani, 2008; Zucchermaglio & Alby, 2005). The elaboration of a theory is represented by an experiential construction which specifies and progresses into the ability to modify itself when it faces cases requiring adaptability, when skills and learning – socially defined – are always interrelated with the experience of the single member of the community in which it developed. It is a theoretical and methodological shared repertoire developing into the story of a mutual commitment which inevitably narrates also about a belonging (Wenger, 1998).

Professionalism is not only a product, but also the condition of a theory describing interactions deriving from a complex and reticular construction process and knowledge: some kind of structured reality in which the links, as well as the interconnections, play an essential role in

maintaining a circularity between knowledge data and the experiential world where they have a place in (Zucchermaglio & Alby, 2005).

The retrospective look is an activity in which many possible meanings can be synthesised since the ideas and the people who expressed and revisited them have behind them a story and a becoming. In this regard, we propose a re-reading of the development of Personal Construct Theory as a social act, in a path in which the theoretical framework is set in the logics of combined stories of actions, of meanings mobilising and coordinating experiences, where the thoughts and knowledge are relationships among active people in and together with the socially and culturally connoted world.

George A. Kelly's personal construct theory: The first step towards a new paradigm

George A. Kelly, founder of Personal Construct Theory (PCT), lived and developed his theory in the United States at the turn of the '50s.

He had a varied and complex training path that began studying Mathematics and led him, passing through educational sciences, to the psychological and psychotherapeutic context.

The particular training that Kelly experienced perhaps explains the originality of his thinking and the distance his theory has from other theories of the time, for instance from Rogers'.

Many authors have tried to reduce Kelly's thought within other theories: he himself used to joke about the many affiliations attributed to him, but so far his theory differs from all other psychological theories under the point of view of rigour and consistency suiting, in an epistemological sense, radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1988).

Kelly began his career as a clinical psychologist travelling along the rural areas of Kansas on his automobile and offering his consultations to those who needed them but had no means to travel in a period of serious economic crisis like the '30s were.

The theoretical basis he used at that time consisted of a few rudiments of psychoanalysis which led him to consider that what could favour a change in people did not depend on the nature of the interpretations he suggested, but it was rather the result of providing people the opportunity to give an alternative meaning to their experience, regardless of the validity of the interpretation itself in theoretical terms. In other words, it was not the correctness of its interpretations, which probably would have been questionable for a psychoanalyst, to be therapeutic, but what people experienced thanks to his interpretations and that allowed them to have a different perspective of themselves. Kelly's reflection with respect to such experience led him to consider that the intervention of the psychotherapist had no relevance if separated from the patient's interpretation: the personal construction the client makes out of what the therapist proposes along with his or her interpretations constitute one single entity, a shared experience in which both of them are equally committed, an inter-subjective and recursive process of reconstructing of meanings. Agreeing with Kelly, some years later, Butt wrote:

However much you try to teach people, their learning is filtered through their system of interpretations. The therapist offers what he calls interpretations, but it is the client who has to make sense of them. It is the construction endowed by the client that is important. (Butt, 2008, p. 9)

Such a consideration, which could sound trivial, is the basis of Kelly's theory.

A fundamental concept which he theorised and which we believe deriving from his initial personal experience as a therapist, is that of *constructive alternativism*. To say it with Kelly's words: "We assume that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (1955, p. 15).

The concept of constructive alternativism was presented by Kelly through one of his most known metaphors, "the man as a scientist":

Might not the individual man, each in his own personal way, assume more of the stature of a scientist, ever seeking to predict and control the course of events with which he is involved? Would he not have his theories, test his hypotheses, and weigh his experimental evidence? And, if so, might not the differences between the personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical points of view of different scientists? (Kelly, 1955, p. 5)

By saying so, Kelly invites us to think of people as individuals who are bravely attempting to find a meaning for their experience and to consider that there are as many points of view about the world as the number of people who are contemplating it.

Kelly did not deny the existence of reality, as we shall further observe and as all radical constructivists do not, but he believed there is no correspondence between reality and the way in which we construe it. Reality, as truth, are intended to be subject to constant revisions and interpretations.

In a historical and psychological perspective, the time in which Kelly published his work *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955) corresponded in Europe to the spreading of Gestalt Psychology and psychoanalysis, and on a more philosophical level, to the time of phenomenology, analytic philosophy, pragmatism, existentialism, just to name a few. For what concerns our argument however, it is the lack of knowledge of phenomenology by Kelly to interest us more, since it was that philosophical movement to inspire some of the elaborations of personal construct theory by Gabriele Chiari from the '90s onwards. In fact, from some comments Kelly made with respect to the phenomenological thought it can be inferred that he had little knowledge about it: his approach to phenomenology was probably limited since he had no access to the works of European authors (it must be considered he was living in the '50s).

The first European psychologist, precisely English, who met Kelly personally and that made it possible for PCT to cross the ocean was Don Bannister, who wrote his graduation thesis on the genesis of schizophrenic thought disorder (Bannister, 1963) according to the view of PCT. But books about Kelly's theory were not published before the early '70s (Bannister, 1970).

From Kansas to Europe: The spreading of personal construct theory

At this stage of our discussion it is worth asking what the situation in Europe in the early '70s was in order to understand what was the cultural turmoil like when Bannister presented the PCT. As it was said before in our premises, knowledge is always implemented by the socio-cultural contexts on which it depends.

Coherently with our cultural tradition, the turmoil we referred to began at first in the philosophical world and at a later time it had an impact on psychology.

Reconstructing geographies and stories

The interest in the PCT in Europe is presumed to be linked to the epistemological assumptions similar to what might be called the post-modern thought, characterised by the disintegration, in the scientific thought, of the concept of reality as conceived in the modern thought.

The primacy of naturalist, realist and rationalist conception in the '70s paved the way to the early formulations of the constructivist thought.

In retrospect, elaboration of constructivist conception got in contact and found an expression in many concepts of phenomenology (Armezzani, 2010), as if, even if both the historical context and the aims were different, constructivism and phenomenology met on a common ground to remind us that the knowledge of knowledge (epistemology) belongs to philosophy.

In the premisses to his edited book *The invented reality*, Watzlawick (1984) cites Kelly among the various constructivist thinkers, along with Jean Piaget and many others.

In order to explore some of the assumptions of constructivism we would like to quote one of its greatest exponents in Europe, Ernst von Glasersfeld:

Radical constructivism [...] is radical because it breaks with convention and develops a theory of knowledge in which knowledge does not reflect an 'objective' ontological reality, but exclusively an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience. (von Glasersfeld, 1984, p. 24)

Constructivism is specified in *radical constructivism*—the epistemology which von Glasersfeld recognises in Piaget (1937)—to distinguish it from *trivial constructivism*, that is, from a kind of constructivism holding the idea of reality as ontologically given and cognizable: a kind of constructivism which falls therefore back into the idea of a correspondence between reality and knowledge or of a representation of reality (as there is in cognitivism).

It is precisely the breaking of the idea of correspondence or representation to characterize the radical constructivist epistemology that, even if maintaining the idea of the existence of reality, considers it not cognizable as such, as von Glasersfeld (1984) clearly claims:

To appreciate this, it is necessary to keep in mind the most fundamental trait of constructivist epistemology, that is, that the world which is constructed is an experiential world that consists of experiences and makes no claim whatsoever about 'truth' in the sense of correspondence with an ontological reality. (p. 29)

Each kind of knowledge cannot be separated from the interpretation the individual makes out of it.

Kelly (1955) wrote something similar: "man creates his own ways of seeing the world in which he lives; the world does not create them for him. He builds constructs and tries them on for size" (p. 12).

However, it was thanks to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987), two Chilean biologists, that constructivism developed further. What is nowadays their well-known quotation, "everything said is said by someone" (p. 25), opened the prospects of constructivist thought towards a further development of the relationship between knowledge and reality. While von Glasersfeld and Kelly maintained the idea of reality as existing even if not cognizable – except through several constructions of it – Maturana and Varela through autopoiesis, that will be treated in the next section – introduce the concept of *objectivity in parenthesis* and the view of the observer as a constituent part of the very reality he observes: "Knowledge is therefore the action of one who knows, and is rooted in the organization of the knower as a

living being" (Ceruti, 1987, p. 12, trans. ours). This is not to argue that man should be imagined in isolation; it rather reaffirms the uniqueness of being in relation.

Acting knowledge: The implications of a choice

All people spend their lives in a social world; actually, the meanings and knowledge people develop have a meaning in the continuous interactions they create. It can be assumed that most of the personal constructs aim at anticipating the behaviour of other human beings, and that the interpretation of inanimate objects is developed, however, in relation to the understanding that also other people have of them. In this sense PCT can be considered a theory of interpersonal construction, due to the fact that the constructs a person develops in the continuous interactions that he/she experiences always tend to interpret and give a meaning to him/herself in relationship with others.

Knowledge is therefore a generative act of a way of living in a context, and the learning we develop is a transformation which is congruent with the living together. Each of the observations we make is, for this reason, also an invitation to participate in a certain way to the community. In the words of Wenger (2000), to know, learn and share are not abstract practices we do for the sake of doing them; they are rather part of a membership. Our identities combine experience and expertise in a certain way of learning, they are the key to understand what does matter and what does not: learning means so to become someone and not only to get to know something.

Such a point of view makes us state that formulating and publishing a theory can be considered in itself as an act of social and cultural involvement: those who propose a professional knowledge are constantly involved in a continuous and diverse stream of social and communicative interactions which disappear only in the accounts of traditional research (Zuccheromaglio, 2002).

Even Kelly's biography, in the publications following his main work dated 1955, often seems to be on the verge of a tension between the need to support his psychology of understanding and acceptance on one side and a kind of moral sense addressed at the community on the other.

Here emerges the responsibility towards the world that we produce with our theories. We live in the world we construe and that, socially speaking, we co-construe. In this sense, extending from the individual perspective to the social one, we can speculate how Kelly tried to advance the idea that not everything is permissible and ethically correct, while trying to maintain the principles of his theory valid. Doing so, he displaces his focus from people to nations, to communities, to societies, as if, expanding the perspective from the individuals to people in interaction, considering them as members of a community, he could afford more easily to suggest the implications of the choices he did not agree with, considering them unethical.

After all Kelly argued we can not escape the problem of good and evil, considering it instead an indispensable construct for the human race (cf. Butt, 2008).

Kelly seems to wonder about a dimension of "ethical interpretations" (Vattimo, 1989) that could be observed above all in inter-subjectivity, in being originally understood from others, within a perspective of awareness of the limits that presuppositions have.

The objective is not that of weakening the logic of one's own theory, but rather to make it even more disposed to its nature of raising questions, referring to an act of self-reflexivity and including in the possibilities of personal meanings production to keep evolving and to be only within a system of anticipations into a larger scenario, which necessarily involves the possibility of existence of mankind. In his latest writings (Maher, 1969), Kelly seems to collocate the

interactive construction of experience of each one of us within a dimension which is interactively construed.

As we shall see in the next chapter, the epistemological assumptions we have illustrated so far and analysed in their historical background have channelled the development of constructivist psychological theories in Italy.

Kelly in Italy: Narrative of a new perspective

PCT was introduced in Italy thanks to Gabriele Chiari and Laura Nuzzo even if, coherently with what we have claimed so far, it must be said that such authors were not separated from a context. Chiari had been one of the first students of Vittorio Guidano and, together with Nuzzo and some others (Georgianna G. Gardner, Francesco Mancini, Sandra Sassaroli, Roberto Lorenzini and Antonio Semerari), he contributed to the debate and the spreading of PCT in Italy (Chiesa, n.d.).

The first traces of Kelly's thought could therefore be found in the context of Italian cognitive-behavioural therapy. Chiari and Nuzzo, until the death of the latter, have been the only ones over the past years to keep the interest in PCT alive, proposing multiple revisions of it and gradually separating it from cognitive psychology.

In 1985, one year after the publication by Maturana and Varela of the Spanish edition of the book *The Tree of Knowledge* and thirty years after the publication of Kelly's *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Chiari published a chapter he wrote together with his father, a university professor of psychology, dedicated to Kelly's personal construct psychotherapy. Here there are a few sentences from it to understand more clearly the steps that led to the revision of PCT over the time:

The conclusions that can be drawn about the place Kelly occupied in the history of contemporary psychology can be traced and summarised in three key points: a contribution that directly concerns a theoretical model of personality; a methodological approach characterised by an epistemological choice of the phenomenological type; a cognitivism which had “constructivist features.” (Chiari & Chiari, 1985, p. 49)

And further:

In this sense, Kelly had some precursors for sure: the kind of constructivism he theorised was that prepared by the Gestalt school; and also the phenomenological approach, which in Kelly and Rogers seems to adapt only to psychotherapeutic efforts, found in the Gestalt theory its theoretical origin. (ibidem)

For some years Chiari and Nuzzo moved the focus of the epistemology to which PCT referred towards constructivism, abandoning altogether the references to Gestalt and recovering only in more recent years the feature it has in common with phenomenology.

Let's just take a step back. In a paper of 1984 another interesting passage can be read: “The psychotherapeutic approach Kelly formalised and described in the '50s is configured as a logical derivation of its general Personal Construct Psychology, commonly considered as a cognitive theory of personality” (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1984, p. 160, trans. ours).

These are the words written by Chiari and Nuzzo. Kelly's theory was difficult to contextualize in a precise epistemological dimension in Italy, and it seemed that the authors were experi-

encing a tension between their previous studies and the intuition that Kelly's thought could have been incompatible with them. Chiari and Nuzzo choose in their writings of that time some aspects of Kelly's theory that could be considered, even today, significantly innovative. Any form of knowledge, thus, when it is seen "from the inside", in the experience of the actors, is never performed alone. Every theory and every construct can be considered a social act dealing with a "public" and shared dimension leading to a before and an after. This applies both at a personal and at a theoretical or professional construction level.

When considering the social aspects of signification processes, the dimensions involved are certainly more numerous and more complex than the possibilities to understand the construction processes of individuals, due to the fact that they bring into play the issue of choice and its outcomes. The emphasis that Kelly's theory placed on the possibility to choose, among different alternatives, the one which allows the greatest chance of elaboration of the person inevitably leads to considerations about freedom of action as not determined by others or from the outside and, consequently, to the implications and responsibilities that such conception of choice have on human conduct. After all, each construction is part of a larger system and in that sense each choice, every change, involves some repercussions on that system.

Choosing certain constructions rather than others not only provides a basis for alternative actions but, in a social sense, means to offer the criteria for defining orders of value to delineate what is happening; the dimensions of construct are chances to socialize our own identity in relation to a context (Alfredetti & Cipolletta, 2011). The constructions and the decisions "produce" part of the environment they face: construing holds therefore in this perspective a strong "enactive" value. Choosing among some alternatives is more than selecting, it is "to give meaning"; and giving meaning shows an institutive value: "I create the object to be seen and inspected when I say or do something", as Weick writes (1995, p. 61). In this sense, our freedom is not absolute, it is freedom within a system. This may apply to any personal choice, both epistemological and theoretical.

Choosing as a metaphor "man as a scientist", that is the idea that the therapist is a sort of "supervisor" in relation with the "pupil"/patient, where both are experts in different fields but still equal one to the other; or thinking of reality as a personal construction are some examples of "enactment". In the writings of Chiari and Nuzzo such "enactment" is possible thanks to having developed a theory placing personal meanings at the core of experience, and refusing pre-constituted conceptual categories in which people had to be placed. A theory, in fact, that attributed the same dignity and legitimacy to individual choices and that held in it a deep sense of humanity and an absolute epistemological rigour could not avoid, in fact, being connected with the way of being of both of them.

Those were the years when the distance from cognitivism was not fully marked yet, the years in which the attempt was that of inserting the PCT within the cognitivist paradigm; and it might be assumed that Kelly's theory was presented as an element of other theories.

The rigour of theoretical development: Between assimilations and accommodations

At a certain point of the elaboration carried on by Chiari and Nuzzo, PCT turned from being an element to be the reference.

The epistemological support to their intuitions towards the PCT came to some extent from Maturana and Varela's (1987) theory of autopoiesis. If radical constructivism was the frame in which to place Kelly's constructivism, the biological theory of knowledge by the two Chilean authors became its keypoint.

Reconstructing geographies and stories

Chiari and Nuzzo were not, once again, the only ones who were inspired by the theory of autopoiesis.

It is in the theory of autopoiesis, in fact, that Vittorio Guidano found the conceptual references on which he based its idea of the therapist as a *strategically oriented perturber*.

Guidano shifts the focus on considering the therapist with his personal and professional characteristics as an observer who cannot be impartial and “objective”, but rather as part of the system he is observing:

The fact that the therapist can no longer be regarded as an external and impartial observer is not only, in fact, the result of the influence that his theoretical views have on the collection and elaboration of the observed data, but also of the influence that his emotional aspects exert on the progress of his report, and so on the definition of therapeutic reality itself. (Guidano, 1987, p. 251)

The definition “*strategically oriented perturber*” refers to the impossibility of determining a change in any person if regardless of his/her specific nature: the verb “determine” loses its applicability; the environment, as well as therapists, do not determine anything, they *perturb*, they can trigger changes, facilitate them, make them possible: no one is the cause, no one suffers the effects.

Maturana and Varela (1987) described the change in specific terms:

we have used to expression “to trigger” an effect. In this way we refer to the fact that the changes that result from the interaction between the living being and its environment are brought about by the disturbing agent but determined by the structure of the disturbed system. (p. 96)

Chiari and Nuzzo, as we mentioned, enriched Kelly's PCT with some theoretical principles of autopoiesis, having found numerous affinities between the two theories.

Despite the fact that Kelly had never had access to the thought of the two Chilean authors, he considered people as forms of motion, protagonists of their acting, reversing once again the common sense of psychology:

In lieu of a fundamental motivational principle to explain why do the things they do, Kelly proposed that human beings are basically “forms of motion” who don't need to be pushed and pulled by internal needs or external stimuli in order to “emit behavior”. Instead, he proposed that people are intrinsically active, and our goal as psychologists is understand not why they act in the first place, but rather in what direction their activity is likely to carry them. (Neimeyer, 2009, p. 11)

In recent times Chiari (2016a) wrote an article dedicated to the comparison between some of the theoretical assumptions of PCT and Maturana's view. To explain it we are going to take as examples Kelly's Modulation Corollary and Choice Corollary in comparison with Maturana's “structural determinism”.

The corollaries are the superordinate principles in Kellyan theory. The corollaries of modulation and choice basically tell us that people choose, among the various meanings with which they organize their experience, those allowing them to anticipate the highest number of events:

in other words, those allowing them to expand their knowledge. We also know from such corollaries that people, when operating this choice, cannot do it regardless of themselves.

In the same way, in Maturana and Varela every change in a composite unity is determined by its structure; external agents can only act as "perturbations".

At this stage of our argument we would like to introduce a theoretical aspect that can be useful in order to develop our statement. This aspect was also used by both Kelly and Maturana and introduced by Piaget: knowledge as a recursive process. Every kind of knowledge is based and organised on previous knowledge, modifying it. Again, here we are dealing with a concept belonging to the field of mathematics that crossed its borders: we are facing some elements of knowledge that *perturb numerous structures of thought*.

As Piaget (1937) wrote, "mind organizes the world by organizing itself" (p. 341).

For Maturana (1996) "there is a recursion whenever the observer can claim that the re-application of an operation occurs on the consequences of its previous application" (p. 153).

Thinking of knowledge as a recursive process gives shape to our theories; if we would consider them as static they would cease, at some point, to exist. PCT is a self-reflexive and recursive theory: it allows the inclusion of new elements in so far as they maintain their internal coherence, modifying itself.

Chiari and Nuzzo, as well as others, have kept PCT "alive" adding elements that could increase its complexity without neglecting its rigour.

The hermeneutic turn: The dialectics of change

In 1993 Chiari and Nuzzo introduced the term "hermeneutic" in order to better distinguish their conception of constructivism from others' ones (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1993, 1996a, 1996b).

We are facing a new encounter: the one between PCT and philosophy, and again it was Chiari and Nuzzo who widened the horizons. Hermeneutics was born in ancient times and we can describe it literally as "the art or the science of interpretation", but Chiari and Nuzzo's interest refers to philosophical hermeneutic and to the philosophers who developed this particular meaning in their works: Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, to name the most well-known.

The introduction of the term "hermeneutic" allowed Chiari and Nuzzo to elaborate the purpose of the therapeutic relationship. The theoretical elaborations which had been brought up to that point went in the direction of placing PCT in a wider theoretical field to legitimate its epistemological rigor. From that moment on, however, the focus shifted on the relationship and on personal meanings. Hermeneutic constructivism is definitively differentiated from cognitivism to get closer to an existential-humanistic approach. For both authors, what deserved absolute importance was to clarify the meaning attributed to hermeneutics:

I've chosen to label my approach as "hermeneutic constructivist psychotherapy", giving the term constructivist the function of denominating the psychotherapeutic direction and not that of specifying, as was the case in the other approaches presented so far. In my case the specification is given by the adjective hermeneutic. (Chiari, 2002, p. 14, trans. ours)

For Chiari and Nuzzo the specification "hermeneutic" modifies the usual vision of psychotherapy where it is only the patient who is called to a change, favouring a vision where both the patient and the therapist are engaged in a conversation in which they are both willing to accept

a change. This change takes place in the conversation and through the conversation. Gadamer's (1989) assertion:

To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (p. 371)

clearly illustrates this concept.

The therapist, through his own acting in relationship with the other, favours this reciprocal changing. By taking part in a hermeneutic conversation he or she allows the patient to express a change which is not the result of coming to terms with his or her limits and errors, but rather of being committed with the other in the construction of possible alternatives.

The sense of inadequacy, so common amongst people who ask for therapeutic help, is transcended into a different dimension made of the reciprocity of the relationship born in the conversation. As Gadamer puts it: "Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person 'understands' the other" (1989, p. 355).

An "hermeneutic" conversation is not a pure exercise of linguistics, it is acting inside the language, meaning by language any expression of the self: verbal, non-verbal, symbolic, metaphoric, corporeal, conscious or unconscious. Language is the medium within which who converses interprets the language of the other.

We believe that Chiari and Nuzzo have found in hermeneutics a greater possibility to make understanding a central aspect in their actions and in the elaboration of the therapeutic relationship. Understanding has, in their definition, a very precise meaning, far from the common psychological sense.

If Kelly's PCT constitutes in itself a kind of psychology of understanding, in terms of favouring the elaboration of the other's point of view as the basis of the therapeutic operation, the reference to hermeneutics has allowed to give that same understanding an ethical form. If PCT can be considered an abstraction of how to understand, hermeneutics is the understanding itself.

In their work *Exploring the sphere of between*, Chiari and Nuzzo (2006) reported the thought of Martin Buber (1937), according to whom personality it's not merely an individual matter, nor is it a pure social product, but a function of the relationship happening in the "sphere of between". Buber's conception is adopted by hermeneutic constructivism which puts the relationship as the central and superordinate dimension that transcends both the subjects concerned in it.

The relationship happens in the sphere of between: that is to say in the breathing relationship between people, on the same ridge where You and I meet. [...] In that case the two terms of the relationship are not interacting separately any more: they complement each other. (Ognibeni & Zoppi, 2014, p. 35, trans. ours)

The issue of recognition and the recent developments of PCP

At this point in our presentation we could underline how, in the majority of the elaborations brought to PCT from Chiari and Nuzzo, the clinical aspect, meant as a content, is almost completely absent: their elaborations are abstract, related to ethics, relationship, epistemology, and

in many cases philosophy. We do not find descriptions of particulars “types of personalities”, of specific psychopathologies or disorders. But this is not by accident.

This “absence” has to do, once more, with a sort of coherence within Kelly's theory itself.

An exemplification of it can be understood from the words that Mair (2016) employed to illustrate Kelly's PCT:

His psychology is an attempt to spell out a framework within which the diversity of individuals' ways of making sense of their worlds can be made more available to us. In this he is not trying to describe what people of different sorts are like, nor to identify the main concerns of individuals or groups. Rather, is he offering a set of templates through which we may make sense of the sense-making of others. His concern is to take us into their world, not to tell us what is there in any particular case, but to offer us pathways through psychological space, such that we can have more chance of attending to the world of the other. (pp. 504-505)

One work by Chiari and his collaborators (1998) and some current developments of the same work constitute an exception to this “absence”. We are referring to their attempt to hypothesize a theory of development in a hermeneutic constructivist way. This attempt is clear in their own words:

The stories told by patients about their relationships with others – including those with their parents when they were children – have different forms and contents; forms and contents which, even in their diversity, can be assorted according to similar traits, once they've been read together as a meta-story, as a psychological theory of personal knowledge can be considered (Ognibeni, 1998). (Chiari and Nuzzo, 1999, p. 109, trans. ours)

In their effort, the authors put particular care in not falling into a sort of determinism which would estrange them from that theoretical coherence to which we referred earlier. In describing possible developmental perspectives this risk appears particularly close, as can be deduced in their own words:

The relationship between the child and the mother or other figures of attachment emerges in the form of recurrent interactions and to the extent that in this story some regularities are constructed (regularities which correspond to structural changes in one or both the systems in relationship). The ensuing path in the child's ontogenetic development will be channelled by this constructions of regularities (constructs) and by those which follow recursively. (Chiari & Nuzzo 1998, p. 104, trans. ours)

To avoid the possibility of some sort of logic of cause and effect, the authors consider the structure of both the mother and the child as simultaneously acting in the creation of recursion, referring to what Maturana e Varela already illustrated: the mother and the child can mutually perturb each other, but one cannot determine the nature of the other.

Recently, Chiari has resumed his former interest for the developmental paths taking hint, once again, from the world of philosophy.

Reconstruing geographies and stories

To complement and integrate his previous research he includes the notion of “recognition” introduced by Hegel (1807), a concept to which many philosophers are giving particular attention.

Furthermore, Chiari was inspired by the thought of Hegel and other philosophers to introduce and recover in its original meaning the concept of inter-subjectivity:

Hegel means that human beings constantly research and desire external recognition because they constantly desire and seek freedom, that is, they look for individual independence from others. They search for a way of living together with others that may fulfil their desire of reciprocity: today, we call this phenomenon intersubjectivity. (Fabiani, 1981, p. 5, trans. ours)

In particular, with regard to the theme of recognition, Chiari analyses the work of Ricoeur, considering its affinity with the concepts expressed in PCT and its high integrability with it. Here is an example:

Ricoeur (2004/2005) regards personal identity as narrative, and the recognition of one’s own identity as necessarily coming through a social recognition, given the constitutively relational and intersubjective structure of the person. This process is supposed to start within the family in the mother-child dialectic, where the development of identity is linked to the mutuality of intersubjective recognition, that is to the willingness to recognize each other as dependent on each other, but at the same time as fully individualized. (Chiari, 2016b, p. 251)

In our view Chiari finds in philosophy the roots that are most useful to integrate those theoretical aspects which to a certain degree remain unexplored, like for example those regarding the developmental paths, now called “paths of uncompleted recognition”.

Conclusions:

The heritage of the story of a community looking towards the future

Once gone beyond a model of linear transfer of knowledge, in which knowledge and practices are usually separated, Kelly's theory has been spread in Italy by Chiari and Nuzzo according to a perspective in which dealing with a theory does not mean to acquire notions and abstract concepts decontextualized from professional practices, but rather taking this theoretical, epistemological and methodological knowledge back in the contexts in which it assumes meaning, inside a professional practice situated and graduated in meaningful actions.

A prolonged and shared commitment, for over twenty years, inside a theoretical re-elaboration which recognised experiences, shared stories, explored new practices, reinterpreted explanations and descriptions, has made it possible to define a field of trajectories within a definite professional identity which is not reduced to the formulation of an intent. In the course of time, this mutual commitment of different actors in different roles has generated resources for acting and has started the birth of a community of professionals who recognize themselves in theoretical assumptions and shared repertoires.

The meeting between generations through the training in Kellyan psychotherapy, promoted by Chiari and his collaborators, turns out to be much more complex of a mere transmission of a “theoretical heritage”, because it has favoured an interconnection of stories of professional

practices tied to individual and collective investments. It is the story of exchanges and regulations, inside a participative frame, oriented to define a professional knowledge, to build a shared vocabulary and a perspective which could orientate the actions of the professionals in the search of meaning.

It is a procedural and hermeneutic instance which stresses how, in order to sustain learning processes, some sort of relational punctuation is required, through which runs the chance to build and experience connections by means of which meanings can be approached, shared and revisited. Under this profile, the ever-growing community of hermeneutic constructivists acts today in a present who invites to future commitments, in the form of participation in professional practices inside a setting of reflections, negotiations, interactions, not only to be seen, heard and told, but to be lived (Wenger, 1998).

While closing our considerations we would like to include some sort of warning for the readers: to consider backwards the birth and development of a theory in its dimensions of situatedness, social belonging and historical contingency, but also to retrace the past already knowing the result, exposes us to the risk of reconstructing that same story as an articulation of events which are inevitably doomed to produce an already known result. An *a posteriori* retrospection may wrongly imply a strengthening of causal connections in a linear way, simplifying complexity, by finding shelter in safe patterns of ordinate and consequential actions. We tried to propose the clinical dimension of the theory of personal constructs, specially valorised and amplified by the Italian experience of Chiari, Nuzzo and their collaborators, to stress those aspects which allow to grasp the complexity and the non-linear, even less unavoidably predetermined fertility, of the development of Kelly's proposal. On the other hand, every comprehension and story that we come to tell is also incomplete because there cannot be a perspective of synthesis able to gather all the different perspectives: knowledge emerging from our transcribed reflections still needs to be carved, confronted, named with different words, and acted in experiences. This path does not aim to conclude in a final recomposition; this contribution is more like ticking a rhythm, a solicitation, the plot of a story still to be fulfilled.

We hope this article will contribute to maintain and argue how dealing with Kelly's heritage did not take and cannot take the form of an attention to knowledge as an accumulated good, as an ability to replicate the past; it is a kind of knowledge that does not represent the possession of a part, but which refers to a commitment based on learning, in its transformative potential, as a system creator of new meanings which could open to further new possibilities.

References

- Alfredetti, M., & Cipolletta, S. (2011). Autori di scelte: dall'incertezza alla complessità [Authors of choices: From uncertainty to complexity]. In D. Cavanna, A. Salvini (a cura di), *Per una psicologia dell'agire umano. Scritti in onore di Erminio Gius* [For a psychology of human acting: Writings in honour of Erminio Gius]. Milano, Italy: Angeli.
- Armezzani, M. (2010). Costruttivismo e fenomenologia [Constructivism and phenomenology]. In M. Castiglioni & E. Faccio (a cura di), *Costruttivismi in psicologia clinica. Teorie, metodi, ricerche* [Constructivisms in clinical psychology: Theories, methods, and research] (pp. 57-78). Torino, Italy: UTET.
- Bannister, D. (1963). The genesis of schizophrenic thought disorder: A serial invalidation hypothesis. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 109, 680-686.
- Bannister, D. (Ed.). (1970). *Perspectives in personal construct theory*. London, England: Academic Press.

- Buber, M. (1937). *I and Thou* (R. G. Smith, Trans.). Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark. (Original work published 1923).
- Butt, T. (2008). *George Kelly: The psychology of personal constructs*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ceruti, M. (1987). Presentazione [Foreword]. In H. Maturana & F. Varela, *L'albero della conoscenza* [The tree of knowledge]. Milano, Italy: Garzanti.
- Chiari, G. (2002). La psicoterapia costruttivista ermeneutica [Hermeneutic constructivist psychotherapy]. In M. L. Nuzzo (a cura di), *Costruttivismo e psicoterapie. Cinque scuole a confronto* [Constructivism and psychotherapies: Five Schools compared] (passim). Ancona, Italy: peQuod.
- Chiari, G. (2016a). So distant, yet so close: Kelly, Maturana, and their constructivist theories. In D. Winter & N. Reed (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of personal construct psychology* (pp. 57-68). London, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chiari, G. (2016b). A narrative hermeneutic approach to personal construct psychotherapy. In D. Winter & N. Reed (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of personal construct psychology* (pp. 241-253). London, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chiari, S., & Chiari, G. (1985). *Il posto di George A. Kelly nella storia della psicologia contemporanea* [The place of George A. Kelly in the history of contemporary psychology]. In F. Mancini e A. Semerari (a cura di), *La psicologia dei costrutti personali: saggi sulla teoria di G. A. Kelly* [Personal construct psychology: Essays on the theory of G. A. Kelly] (pp. 37-51). Milano, Italy: Angeli.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (1984). *Le teorie cognitive e cognitivo-comportamentali: orientamenti e presupposti* [Cognitive and cognitive-behavioural theories: Trends and assumptions]. In G. Chiari & M. L. Nuzzo (a cura di), *Crescita e cambiamento della conoscenza individuale* [Growth and change of individual knowledge] (pp. 156-172). Milano, Italy: Angeli.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (1993). *Personal construct theory within psychological constructivism: Precursor or avant-garde?* Plenary paper presented at the Xth International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, Townsville, Australia.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (1996a). Personal construct theory within psychological constructivism: Precursor or avant-garde? In B. M. Walker, J. Costigan, L. L. Viney & B. Warren (Eds.), *Personal construct theory: A psychology for the future* (pp. 25-54). Sydney, Australia: The Australian Psychological Society.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (1996b). Psychological constructivisms: A metatheoretical differentiation. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 9, 163-184.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (1998). *Percorsi personali di dipendenza* [Personal paths of dependency]. In G. Chiari e M. L. Nuzzo (a cura di), *Con gli occhi dell'altro* [With the other's eyes] (pp. 101-121). Padova, Italy: Unipress.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (1999). *La storia del paziente secondo Gabriele Chiari e Maria Laura Nuzzo* [The story of the patient according to Gabriele Chiari and Maria Laura Nuzzo]. In F. Veglia (a cura di), *Storie di vita* [Life stories] (pp. 104-114). Torino, Italy: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Chiari, G., & Nuzzo, M. L. (2006). Exploring the sphere of between: The adoption of a framework of complementarity and its implications for a constructivist psychotherapy. *Theory & Psychology*, 16, 257-275.
- Chiesa, G. (n.d.). Intervista con Gabriele Chiari [Interview to Gabriele Chiari]. Disponibile in <http://digilander.libero.it/ascoweb/archivio/personaggi/chiari.htm#fin>

- Chiesa, G. (2009, maggio). La "Scuola Romana" di psicoterapia cognitiva [The Roman School of cognitive psychotherapy]. *Il blog APC e SPC* [The APC and SPC Blog]. Disponibile in <http://cognitivismo.com/2009/05/16/la-“scuola-romana”-di-psicoterapia-cognitiva/>
- Fabiani, C. M. (1981). Il riconoscimento in Hegel [Recognition in Hegel]. *Dialettica e Filosofia* [Dialectics and philosophy]. Disponibile in http://www.dialetticae filosofia.it/public/pdf/81riconosciment_2_.pdf
- Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans., 2nd ed.). London, England: Continuum.
- Gius, E., & Alfredetti, M. (2005). *Trasformazioni sociali e nuove consapevolezze* [Social transformations and new awarenesses]. Milano, Italy: Giuffrè.
- Goodwin, C. (1994). Professional vision. *American Anthropologist*, 96, 606-633.
- Guidano, V. F. (1987). *The complexity of Self: A developmental approach to psychopathology and therapy*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1807). *Phänomenologie der Geistes*. Würzburg: Goebbard.
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs* (vols. 2). New York, NY: Norton.
- Kelly, G. A. (1969). The language of hypothesis: Man's psychological instrument. In B. A. Maher (Ed.), *Clinical psychology and personality: The selected papers of George Kelly* (pp. 147-162). New York, NY: Wiley. (Original work written 1964)
- Latour, B. (1986). Visualization and cognition: Thinking with eyes and hands. *Knowledge and Society*, 6, 1-40.
- Maher, B. A. (Ed.). (1969). *Clinical psychology and personality: The selected papers of George Kelly*. New York: Wiley.
- Mair, M. (2016). George Kelly's psychology of understanding: Questioning our understanding, understanding our questioning. In Winter, D. A. & Reed, N. (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of personal construct psychology* (pp. 499-517). Chichester, England: Wiley.
- Mantovani, G. (2008). *Analisi del discorso e contesto sociale* [Discourse analysis and social context]. Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino.
- Maturana, H. (1996). *Biology of self-consciousness*. In G. Trautteur (Ed.), *Consciousness: Distinction and reflection* (pp. 145-175). Napoli, Italy: Bibliopolis.
- Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston, MS: New Science Library.
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2009). *Constructivist psychotherapy: Distinctive features*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ognibeni, M. (1998). La centralità dell'elaborazione spontanea nella relazione terapeutica [The centrality of spontaneous elaboration in the psychotherapeutic relationship]. In G. Chiari e M. L. Nuzzo (a cura di), *Con gli occhi dell'altro* [With the other's eyes] (pp. 91-100). Padova, Italy: Unipress.
- Ognibeni, M., & Zoppi, O. (2014). Lo psicoterapeuta e l'amore [The psychotherapist and love]. *Costruttivismi*, 1, 32-41. Disponibile in <http://www.aippc.it/costruttivismi/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/08.Lamore.pdf>
- Piaget J. (1937). *La construction du réel chez l'enfant*. Neuchatel, Switzerland: Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Ricoeur, P. (2005). *The course of recognition* (D. Pellauer, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 2004)
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professional think in action*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Vattimo, G. (1989). *Al di là del soggetto* [Beyond subject]. Milano, Italy: Feltrinelli.

Reconstruing geographies and stories

- von Glasersfeld, E. (1984). An introduction to radical constructivism. In P. Watzlawick (Ed.), *The invented reality: How do we know what we believe we know? Contributions to constructivism* (pp. 17-40). New York, NY: Norton.
- Watzlawick, P. (Ed.). (1984). *The invented reality: How do we know what we believe we know? (Contributions to constructivism)*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. London, England: Sage.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice. Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and learning system. *Organization*, 7, 225-246.
- Zucchermaglio, C. (2002). *Psicologia culturale dei gruppi* [Cultural psychology of groups]. Milano, Italy: Carocci.
- Zucchermaglio, C., & Alby, F. (2005). *Gruppi e tecnologie al lavoro* [Groups and technologies at work]. Bari-Roma, Italy: Laterza.

The Authors



Mara Ognibeni, psychologist and psychotherapist, teacher AIPPC and SITCC, works as a teacher in the School of Specialization of CESIPc (Florence and Padua) and as psychotherapist both in couple and individual settings in Florence and Ancona. She has long been interested in training processes within Hermeneutic Constructivism. Her attention is focused on the relationship in both group and individual settings.

Email: m.ognibeni@fastnet.it

Manola Alfredetti, PhD in clinical and community psychology, psychologist and psychotherapist. Teacher at the School of Specialization in Constructivist Psychotherapy at CESIPc, Padua, she is research and teaching consultant at Federazione Scuole Materne in Trento. She privately practices individual psychotherapy. Interested in theoretical-epistemological aspects and related therapeutic and educational implication, as well as in decision making and teaching, community of practice and learning on constructivist perspective. She collaborated at the Social Psychology chair at Padua University, and taught as contract professor at University of Siena.

Email: manola.alfredetti@gmail.com

Reference (APA)

- Ognibeni, M., & Alfredetti, M. (2017). Reconstruing geographies and stories: The path of personal construct theory in the individual and cultural experience of its followers. *Costruttivismi*, 4, 67-83. doi: 10.23826/2017.01.067.083