

Costruttivismi, 4: 204-207, 2017
Copyright @ AIPPC
ISSN: 2465-2083
DOI: 10.23826/2017.02.204.207



REVIEWS

Il costruttivismo in psicologia e in psicoterapia.
Il caleidoscopio della conoscenza
[Constructivism in psychology and psychotherapy:
The kaleidoscope of knowledge]

by Gabriele Chiari

Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2016, 241 pp.

Reviewed by

Cristina Sassi

Scuola di Psicoterapia Costruttivista, CESIPc Firenze

Constructivism: A kaleidoscopic journey through knowledge

Gabriele Chiari, a hermeneutic constructivist psychotherapist, since the eighties became interested, together with Maria Laura Nuzzo, to the psychology of personal constructs (PCP) of George A. Kelly, and has contributed personally to the spreading and elaboration of constructivism in Italy in the psychotherapeutic field.

Since then, he has told and enriched PCP through many writings and national and international journal articles, elaborating it in the light of other theoretical contributions not limited to the ambit of psychotherapy, such as Maturana's theory of autopoiesis and, more recently, the phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy. In this way, he favoured even in those who have not had the possibility to know him at the University of Florence or at the School of Specialization in Constructivist Psychotherapy of CESIPc of which he is Co-Director and Teacher for thirty years, a "living" experience of the encounter with a theory in motion, of the continuous becoming of a perspective which moves without losing the rigour of a superordinate thread, of an identity.

The writer, having had many occasions of experiencing such movement in the encounter with the elaborations of Chiari, asks therefore you to the reading of this last book, passing you the tool that the author himself invites to bring to our eyes: a kaleidoscope.

A kaleidoscopic journey through knowledge

Let us try to look through it and to follow the path of exploration of the constructivist perspective Chiari invites the readers: psychology students, psychologists, trainee psychotherapists, people curious to the possibility of creating various personal worlds, through the movement of the small pieces of coloured glasses and their configurations and re-configurations in infinite structures of experience. An invitation to follow a path of knowledge of the psychological constructivism through the exploration of three “turns” or “shakings” of the kaleidoscope, and to “*observe carefully, look at what happens*”, together.

The first “turn” concerns the constructivist view of personal knowledge, a knowledge which transcends the mirroring/invention dualism in the relation between knowledge and reality, in the direction of what Francisco Varela described as the “middle way of knowledge”, or the “alternative of enaction”. It tells of a hermeneutic view of knowing and understanding people in which subject and object of knowledge emerge together, in a relationship of mutual specification.

A shaking of the kaleidoscope aims, in the author’s intentions, at “denaturalizing” psychology, that is, at favouring a view about people which moves and reorganizes the pieces of glasses bound by naturalistic interpretations, and at asking again, “what psychology should be interested in?;” in understanding human experience, in knowing in the sense of interpreting people’s experience.

And it is “to examine what happens” by moving in this way the kaleidoscope on personal knowledge, that the author tells us the forms and the colours which take part in the elaboration of this perspective, through the authors and the theories that, in various disciplinary fields, contributed to the development of psychological constructivism.

Beginning from Jean Piaget and his theory of knowledge, and passing through the philosophical, cybernetic and psychological contributions of Ernst von Glasersfeld, the author introduces the theory of personal constructs of George A. Kelly, that he considers just the starting point for talking of psychological constructivism, and of which gives a concise and thick presentation. Then he dwells upon the social constructionist movement, the narrative approaches, and the contributions from cybernetics and biology, especially the theory of autopoiesis of Humberto R. Maturana.

Considering this look at the constructivist view of knowledge as an exploration of epistemological nature, the author invites us “to become curious see what happens” by introducing “other pieces of glass”, those coming from the history of philosophy: From the philosophy of “as if”, to the American pragmatism, up to the contributions of the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Hans-George Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and of the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose view of identity as narrative, with the ethical implications deriving from that, has particularly contributed to the latest elaboration of the hermeneutic constructivist perspective, of which Gabriele Chiari is author.

A turn of the kaleidoscope as a proposal to explore new combinations of viewpoints, “even to the point of making actively experiments with them,” experiments of knowledge, viable for those who choose to venture into the putting up for discussion what is familiar and known; an open-mindedness that the writer regards as the peculiar aspect of the constructivist view of knowledge “in action”.

Chiari concludes the first part exploring the distinctions, misunderstandings and criticism brought to constructivism by the traditional approaches, taking from this the opportunity for creating useful distinctions within constructivism, especially the discrimination – elaborated together with M. Laura Nuzzo – between *epistemological* and *hermeneutic constructivism*. The former describes the constructivist perspectives within the dualistic consideration of a separation between subject and object of knowledge (what is the relationship between us *and* the world?), whereas the latter suggests an overcoming of such dichotomy by considering

knowledge as a mutual specification between knower and known (we are *in* the world), as an interpretation dependent on the history of our relationship with the world, a relation of complementarity, in which experience emerges in the encounter between subject and object, by transcending both of them (*intersubjectivity*).

With the second shaking of the kaleidoscope, Chiari moves from epistemology to theory, by having especially recourse to three “big” theories that make reference to a constructivist epistemology: J. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, G. A. Kelly’s personal construct theory, and H. R. Maturana’s theory of autopoiesis. Within them, he looks at their similar elements together with their theoretical peculiarities.

The common epistemological point of departure is a view of knowledge as interpretation of personal experience, based on a relationship of complementarity between what we construe as similar and what we construe as different in the flow of life. Such knowing process is continually changing even though maintaining a stability, thus giving personal knowledge the form of a hierarchically organised system always in motion.

Starting from such a reading of knowing processes, Chiari chooses to pay a special attention to the process of construction of *self*, to its *emergence* as an intersubjective experience in *recursive* and *homeorhetic* processes of knowledge in the encounter with people, and to the *continuity* of self, that is, to the processes of maintenance of an adaptation in the direction of the conservation of personal identity. Therefore, he presents some theoretical elaborations relating to such processes, elaborations regarded as superordinate, interpretative hypotheses useful to diagnostic and therapeutic ends, that emerge within a community of therapists, and concerning developmental trajectories and different modes of organisation of personal experience: the proposal of V. F. Guidano of personal meaning organisations, that of V. Ugazio of family semantic polarities, that of Chiari and Nuzzo of paths of dependency channelized by different transitions presented in 1994, and the most recent elaboration of Chiari of paths of recognition.

Another aspect to which Chiari chooses to pay a special attention in the second part of his book concerns the emotional experiences, in their Kellyan reading in terms of personal constructions of transitions (changes). They have a crucial relevance in the maintenance of an adaptation of the organisation of personal experience, and therefore in the construction of the therapeutic relationship and in the very therapeutic process.

The Author introduces the question as a “disputed knot” within the constructivist approaches, as one of the aspects more resistant to a consistent constructivist re-reading of the mind/body and cognition/emotion dualisms. Many of these approaches remain tied—especially in the ambit of the so-called psychosomatic disorders—to the cognitivist tradition, in which the *reductionist belief* and the *psychophysical belief* are continuing. Chiari, by introducing the thought of Graham and his *specific attitude hypothesis* of psychosomatic illness, suggests what can become, in his opinion, a rigorously constructivist road to understanding and elaboration of the experiences that are traditionally viewed as physiological (cancer, for example) or psychosomatic: that is, the extension of the range of convenience of the psychological theory to the processes that—being in themselves neither physical nor psychological—one can try to construe by means of different languages (*linguistic parallelism*), so as to explore the type of possibilities that such choice can create within the psychotherapeutic paths.

Lastly, the Author closes this second part of the book with a review of the aspects of Kelly’s theory he considers more popular and known, that is, the techniques for the exploration of personal knowledge: from the *repertory grids* to the “narrative” *self-characterization*, from the drawing techniques of T. Ravenette to the conversational techniques like the *laddering* of D. Hinkle and the *pyramidal procedure* of A. Landfield.

The third shaking of the kaleidoscope describes the passage from the theory to therapy, that is, the translation on a psychotherapeutic level of the theories that make reference to psycho-

A kaleidoscopic journey through knowledge

logical constructivism, together with the account of the revolutionary implications of such a choice.

The Author, in the attempt to create a handy order for the presentation of the constructivist psychotherapeutic approaches, chooses to utilize—in the ambit of this “fuzzy set with indistinct boundaries”—the distinction proposed by R. A. Neimeyer based on four basic metaphors. Within such categories, he situates his proposal of a hermeneutic constructivist psychotherapy in the metaphor of therapy as conversational elaboration.

Consistently with the superordinate thread of the shakings of the kaleidoscope, Chiari invites again us *to become curious of what happens* by exploring these different psychotherapeutic approaches by and large, in their although vague and indistinct configuration, trying to highlight the constructible aspects of sharing between them: *change* as constitutive of the person, together with the understanding of the experience of resistance to change; the *disorder*, through the formulations of Kelly, Winter, Walker, up to that of Chiari himself in terms of a suspension of experience by the person who, anticipating the loss of his or her own identity, chooses not to change; the *transitive diagnosis* as the answer to the question “what could this person become?,” therefore in its potential to favour courses of change; the *therapeutic relationship* as an alliance, constructed through an atmosphere of *acceptance* and *support*; and the *therapeutic process*, as the attempt to reactivate the person’s elaborative movement by means of a reconstruction of experience.

The story finishes here, but the kaleidoscope remains moving in the Author’s hands: Gabriele Chiari himself tells in the introduction the temporary renouncement to a fourth part of the book about his own “personal way to understand that ontological adventure defined as psychotherapy,” and it is in its exploration and elaboration that I imagine the kaleidoscope keeps spinning in his hands.

The Author

Cristina Sassi is a psychologist specialised in psychotherapy, and work as a private practitioner since 1999. After graduated cum laude in Psychology at the University of Bologna in 1997, in 2002 she specialized in psychotherapy with a constructivist hermeneutic approach at the School of CESIPc in Florence. Teacher member of AIPPC (Associazione Italiana di Psicologia e Psicoterapia Costruttivista) since 2012.

She cooperates for decades with public and private corporations in the field of disability (design of social-educational and rehabilitative services, support to family, training of social workers, supervision of the team).

Email: cristinasassi72@gmail.com



Citazione (APA)

Sassi, C. (2017). Constructivism: A kaleidoscopic journey through knowledge. Review of *Il costruttivismo in psicologia e in psicoterapia. Il caleidoscopio della conoscenza* by G. Chiari. *Costruttivismi*, 4, 204-207. doi: 10.23826/2017.02.204.207