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**DO PSYCHOTHERAPISTS USE DIFFERENT CONSTRUCT SUBSYSTEMS FOR CONSTRUING CLIENTS AND ACQUAINTANCES? A REPERTORY GRID STUDY**

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Forty-seven psychotherapists were studied to determine if they used different construct subsystems for construing clients and personal acquaintances. The sample included therapists who varied in terms of sex, age, years of experience, and clinical discipline. Subjects chose six personal acquaintances and six nonpsychotic individual therapy clients who were then used as elements in a Repertory Grid. Constructs were elicited by comparing pairs of elements; all elements were rated on the constructs. It was found that constructs elicited about one domain (clients or acquaintances) were less applicable to elements from the other domain. Therapists more often used constructs related to emotional stability when construing clients than acquaintances, whereas differences in construct content were not evident on several other dimensions. The domain of client construal exhibited greater cognitive differentiation and hierarchical organization than did that of acquaintance construal. The results suggest that therapists use different conceptual subsystems for client and acquaintance construal. Implications for the training of therapists are discussed.

Psychotherapy is a type of personal relationship in which the participants continually reconstrue each other. The client's construal of the therapist has received much attention, often under the label of transference. The

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therapist’s construal of clients has been less discussed and researched. As the psychotherapy relationship differs in nature from other relationships, such as the therapist’s nonprofessional relationships, it is likely that therapists use distinct construct subsystems for construing clients and acquaintances.

Kelly’s (1955) psychology of personal constructs is based on the assumption that people evolve systems of personal constructs for the purpose of anticipating and making sense of the world, including the interpersonal world of self and others. Kelly emphasized that personal constructs apply to only a finite range of possible objects. That is, constructs have a limited range of convenience to which they may be applied. Furthermore, a person may evolve distinct construct subsystems for interpreting different ranges of phenomena. Thus, from the personal construct perspective, therapists could be expected to evolve distinct construct subsystems for construing clients and personal acquaintances.

Whether therapists do indeed have separate conceptual subsystems for client and acquaintance construal can be assessed by looking at several aspects of their client and acquaintance construal. Are constructs from one domain more applicable to people from the domain from which they were elicited, or are they equally applicable to people from both domains? Are there differences in the content of constructs used in these different domains? Do the domains differ in structural properties such as cognitive differentiation or hierarchical organization?

Few studies have examined differences in client and acquaintance construal by therapists. Two studies by Lifshitz (1974) and Bender (cited in Tully, 1976), however, have examined aspects of these differences in groups of social workers. Lifshitz presented evidence that experienced social workers in Israel tended to use different types of constructs than did inexperienced therapists. Her results support the position that therapists’ construal of their acquaintances is modified as a result of training and/or practice, presumably to be more in tune with their construing of clients. These results suggest that there might not be great differences between the two domains. A striking weakness of her study, however, is that Lifshitz confused training, experience, and age. In fact, there was a mean difference of 18.2 years (22.7 to 39.9 years) between her experienced and inexperienced groups. Thus, it is possible that the differences between groups may have been influenced by this large age differential.

One unpublished study by Bender (cited in Tully, 1976) compared 12 London psychiatric social workers’ client-construing and acquaintance-construing subsystems. The constructs in the two domains differed in content; the social workers used more psychiatric terminology when construing clients, whereas they used constructs concerning self-in-
on the range of clients who are being construed by the clinicians. It is possible that hospitalized psychotic clients are construed differently from less disturbed clients seen on an outpatient basis. Presumably the latter are less different on a variety of dimensions from most therapists' acquaintances than are the psychotic inpatients. This consideration suggests that restriction of the clients who are to be construed to nonpsychotic outpatients would allow more subtle differences in client and acquaintance construal to become apparent, differences that could be masked by the probable greater differences between acquaintances and psychotic clients.

METHODS

SUBJECTS

Subjects consisted of 47 therapists recruited from three different sources. The Boston Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies, a psychoanalytic training institute, supplied 25 subjects from among its student body. Nine members of the North American Personal Construct Network also participated in the study.

Use of three settings produced a subject group with considerable variety in regard to a number of characteristics. Twenty male and 27 female subjects were included in the sample. The ages of the subjects ranged from 24 to 64, with a mean age of 38.57 (SD = 9.11). The mean number of years of clinical experience of the subjects was 9.74 (SD = 6.99, range from 1 to 35). The sample included 19 subjects who listed their clinical discipline as psychologist (this included people at both the masters' and doctoral levels), 4 psychiatrists, 12 social workers, 2 psychiatric nurses, 2 mental health counselors, and 8 who wrote in “psychoanalyst.” Twenty-nine subjects had a psychodynamic orientation, 6 an eclectic, 1 each a cognitive and humanistic, and 9 listed “other.” Most of these therapists were primarily engaged in individual verbally oriented psychotherapy. Furthermore, with the exception of the personal construct therapists, most were psychodynamically or psychoanalytically oriented.

MATERIALS

Repertory Grid Task. The main instrument administered to all subjects was a Repertory Grid (Rep Grid; Fransella & Bannister, 1977; Kelly, 1955) with 13 elements—six acquaintances, six clients, plus the self. Subjects were encouraged to list a variety of acquaintances, including some male, some female, some whom they knew well and others whom they did not know as well, and some whom they liked a lot and some whom they did not like as much. Similarly, the subjects also listed six adult patients or clients with whom they had worked in individual outpatient psychotherapy and who, in their opinion, had never been psychotic. As with acquaintances, variety was encouraged among the clients listed. Acquaintances listed had been known an average of 10.66 years (SD = 5.83); for clients the mean was 2.28 (SD = 1.39).

Twelve constructs were elicited from each subject by presenting pairs of elements and asking subjects to “think of a significant way that the two people are alike in which they are different.” The way in which the elements were alike or different, the construct pole, was listed under the CONSTRUCT heading to the right of the grid. The opposite of the construct pole, the contrast pole, was listed under the CONTRAST heading on the same row. Subjects then indicated by circling “a” or “d” if the construct was a way in which the two elements were alike or different, respectively. Four construct-contrast pairs were generated by comparing two acquaintances, four by comparing clients, and four by comparing a client and an acquaintance.

Beneath the 12 constructs elicited from subjects, the grid contained five supplied constructs. The correlations between the ratings of the elements on these supplied constructs and the elicited constructs were intended to be used as a measure of the meaning of the elicited constructs. The supplied constructs were markers of the five robust factors that have repeatedly been found in people's ratings of others (Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981; Norman, 1963; Wiggins, 1973). The specific supplied constructs were: Factor I, talkative—silent; Factor II, good-natured—irritable; Factor III, responsible—undependable; Factor IV, calm—anxious; Factor V, imaginative—simple, direct.

These marker constructs were chosen from among the adjective rating items used by Norman (Wiggins, 1973). For Factors I, II, and IV (which Norman called Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability, respectively), the items chosen were those that had the highest loadings on these factors in at least one of Norman's samples. In these cases the items also either had the highest loading (Factor IV) or were tied with another item for highest loading (Factors I and II) on the same factor in another sample that Norman reported. For Factor III (Conscientiousness), the item chosen was the one with the highest loading on the factor in Norman's sample of fraternity men. The loading of this item in his other sample of dormitory students was trivially lower (.42 versus .43) than another item. Choice of each of these four items was supported also by their low loadings on the other factors. In the case of Factor V (Culture), the item chosen was one with slightly lower loadings on the factor in
the two samples (.68, compared to a high of .75, and .70, compared to .84), because the other items with high loadings on this factor also had unacceptably high loadings on other factors.

Subjects were instructed to complete the Rep Grid by rating each element on each construct, using a 7-point Likert-type scale from −3 to +3.

DATA ANALYSIS

Cognitive Structure. Cognitive differentiation and hierarchical organization were assessed by A. W. Landfield’s (1971, 1977; c.f. A. W. Landfield & Cannell, 1988; Leitner et al., 1975) Functionally Independent Construction (FIC) and Chi Square (CHISQ) measures. FIC for constructs (FICc) is a measure of the number of independent clusters of constructs, where a cluster consists of all those constructs with a number of matches of sign (+, −, or 0) above a specified cutoff with at least one other construct in the cluster. For example, the constructs

| Nice vs. Nasty: | −2 | −3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Strong vs. Weak: | −2 | −2 | 1 | −2 | 0 | 3 |

would be reduced to

| Nice vs. Nasty: | − | − | + | + | 0 | + |
| Strong vs. Weak: | − | − | + | − | 0 | + |

The number of direct matches between these two constructs is 4, while the number of inverse matches is 1 and the number of 0 matches is 1. So the larger of 4 and 1 is added to the number of 0 matches, namely 1, giving an overlap score of these two constructs of 5. The two constructs will thus be in the same cluster if the cutoff for cluster membership is 5 or less. Corrections would be made in the score if the two constructs contained too many zero overlaps (A. W. Landfield & Cannell, 1988), a condition that does not hold in this example. The FICc thus consists of the number of independent clusters generated by this procedure. An FIC score for people or elements (FICp) is computed analogously; this score is added to the FIC score to generate a total FIC score (FICtp).

The CHISQ measure of hierarchical organization is based on the assumption that constructs used with finer discrimination and sensitivity will tend to have all possible rating levels used relatively equally (A. W. Landfield & Schmittiel, 1983). In order to calculate CHISQ, the sign of the ratings is ignored, producing four possible rating levels (0 to 3). A standard chi-square statistic is then calculated for each construct to determine the extent of deviation from the theoretically derived value for

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equal use of 2/7 for levels 1 to 3 and 1/7 for level 0. In the above example, the rating level 0 is used one time, levels 1 and 2 are used twice each, and level 3 is also used once, resulting in a CHISQ for this construct of .4167. The results of these analyses are averaged over all constructs, and this average is added to a similarly derived average for Rep Grid elements to produce the CHISQp score.

RESULTS

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Acquaintance constructs were elicited by comparing two acquaintances, while client constructs were elicited by comparing two clients. Similarly, comparison constructs resulted from comparing a client with an acquaintance. Each therapist subject in the current study provided four constructs of each type. Similarity constructs resulted from the subject construing a way in which the two target elements were alike, while difference constructs resulted from the two target elements being construed as different.

RANGE OF CONVENIENCE

It was hypothesized that the sum of the number of zero ratings when acquaintance constructs were applied to clients and when client constructs were applied to acquaintances (the number of opposite domain zero ratings) would be greater than the number of zero ratings when acquaintance constructs were applied to acquaintances and client constructs applied to clients (the number of same domain zero ratings). Confirmation of this hypothesis would be taken as evidence that client and acquaintance constructs have a wider range of convenience when applied to the same type of element used in eliciting the construct than when applied to the opposite type of element.

To test this hypothesis, the number of same domain zero ratings and of opposite domain zero ratings were calculated for each subject over all elicited constructs. A chi-square test was then performed for each subject, measuring the degree to which the breakdown of total zero ratings to same domain and opposite domain ratings deviated from the theoretically derived null hypothesis of 50% of the zero ratings in each domain. Because the chi-square is a nondirectional statistic, it could not be used directly as an indicator of whether or not a given subject provided support for the hypothesis. Thus, the chi-square values were
transformed to a z-score (Rosenthal, 1984) by squaring and adding a + sign if there were more opposite domain zero ratings than same domain (as predicted), a − sign if the converse were true. A one-sample t-test was then performed to test if the mean z-value was greater than zero as predicted by the hypothesis.

The mean number of opposite domain zero ratings was 6.34 ($SD = 6.48$), while the mean number of same domain zero ratings was 3.15 ($SD = 2.61$). The difference was in the predicted direction. The mean z-value of the difference within subjects was 0.79 ($SD = 1.50$), which is significantly greater than zero, as predicted, providing strong support for the hypothesis ($t = 3.41$, $df = 41$, $p < .005$). Due to missing data and to the fact that calculation of some measures involved dividing by a quantity that could, in some cases, be zero, the number of subjects in some analyses was less than the maximum of 47.

In addition to the aggregate analysis described above, the frequency of subjects whose pattern of zero ratings were in the direction predicted by the hypothesis (opposite domain zero ratings greater than same domain), whose pattern of zero ratings was opposite to that predicted, and who had equal numbers of zero ratings were determined. The frequencies were 30 (71.4%), 11 (25.2%), and 1 (2.4%), respectively ($X^2 = 10.01$, $df = 1$, $p < .005$), which indicates that the hypothesis was supported in regard to individual subjects, as well as to therapists taken as an aggregate. Since it was not possible to create an expected value for subjects who neither confirmed nor disconfirmed the hypothesis, the frequency of this occurrence (1 in the present instance) was equally divided between the confirming and disconfirming categories.

CONSTRUCT CONTENT

It was hypothesized that client constructs would differ in content from acquaintance constructs. An operational statement of the hypothesis was that client constructs and acquaintance constructs would tend to correlate with different items from the supplied set of standard constructs that were markers of five factors found in peer–personality rating studies.

To test this hypothesis, a correlation matrix between the 12 elicited constructs and 5 factor markers was generated for each subject. A cutoff was sought so that, across all subjects, the number of correlations greater in absolute magnitude than this cutoff would be equal to the total number of elicited constructs; that is, on average, each elicited construct would correlate with one and only one factor marker. It was found empirically that a cutoff of .60 approximated this ideal quite closely.1 For each of the five factor markers, the number of client constructs and of acquaintance constructs that had a correlation with the marker greater than or equal to .60 in absolute value was calculated in order to generate the numbers of client and acquaintance constructs loading on each factor. A correlated t-test was then performed for each factor marker. (The independent variable was client versus acquaintance construct; the dependent variable was the number of correlations exceeding the cutoff.)

Table 1 gives the mean number of client and acquaintance constructs loading on each factor, as well as the t-tests of differences between these means. As can be seen, only for factor 4, emotional stability, was there a significant difference between the number of client and acquaintance constructs loading on the factor.

COGNITIVE STRUCTURE

Differences in cognitive differentiation and hierarchical organization between therapists' client and acquaintance construct subsystems were proposed, but no expected direction of differences was predicted.

The measures of cognitive differentiation, FICp, and hierarchical organization, CHISQp, were calculated for the portion of the Rep Grid...
consisting of the 6 acquaintances and the 12 elicited constructs, using the K. Landfield (1983) computer program. Because it was believed that supplied constructs might differ in their properties from elicited ones, they were not included in this analysis. Analogous measures were also calculated for the client portion of the Rep Grid.

The calculation of the FICcp scores required that a cutoff be chosen for the number of matches between rows or between columns, which were to be taken as indicating that two rows or two columns were to be considered to be functionally identical. A cutoff of 80% was used, as suggested by A. W. Landfield (1971). Thus, two rows were considered functionally identical if 5 of the 6 ratings matched in sign, while two columns were judged functionally identical if 10 out of 12 ratings matched in sign.

The mean FICcp for acquaintances was 7.00 (SD = 2.60), while for clients the mean was 8.55 (SD = 3.37); the difference in means was significant (t = 3.12, df = 39, p < .005), indicating a greater differentiation in client than acquaintance construal. The mean CHISQcp for acquaintances was 94.83 (SD = 26.53), while the mean for clients was 85.07 (SD = 19.96). Thus, the client domain was more hierarchically organized than the acquaintance domain (t = 2.33, df = 39, p < .05).

SUBSYSTEM DIFFERENTIATION AND THERAPIST BACKGROUND

The previous findings support the position that therapists tend to use relatively distinct construct subsystems for construing clients and personal acquaintances. In order to determine the generality of the findings within the sample, the relationship of the degree of subsystem differentiation to the background variables age, sex, years of clinical experience, highest educational degree, theoretical orientation, clinical discipline, and recruitment group was examined. Some levels of degree, orientation, and discipline had to be combined in order to guarantee adequate cell sizes for analysis.

To assess the relationship of differentiation in construct range of convenience and therapist demographics, the z-score measuring the degree of differentiation was correlated with each of the three demographic variables (with sex treated as a dummy variable). None of the correlations were significant. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated no significant differences due to degree, orientation, discipline, or recruitment group.

Examining the relation of differentiation in cognitive structure and construct content with the background variables was slightly more difficult, due to the existence of both a client and acquaintance score for each variable for each subject. Using the raw difference between these scores in analyses posed all the problems of using change scores (Cohen & Cohen, 1975). Nevertheless, correlational and ANOVA analyses were performed for each variable (FIC, CHISQ, and the five content dimensions) in a manner analogous to that for the range of convenience analysis. In only one case, CHISQ and discipline, was there a significant relationship between one of these variables and a background variable. This one significant finding was less than would be expected by chance.

Possible differences in differentiation of cognitive structure and construct content were further examined by means of Analysis of Covariance. The dependent variable was the client domain score for each of the seven structure or content variables, the factor was degree, orientation, discipline, or recruitment group; and the covariate was the acquaintance domain score for the variable. This procedure is identical to partialing out the acquaintance domain score from the difference of client and acquaintance domain scores. For none of the variables examined in this set of analyses did subsystem differentiation differ by treatment group.

An additional set of analyses were performed examining the relationship of each of the three demographic variables to the degree of subsystem differentiation using a hierarchical regression model, as recommended for these kinds of data by Cohen and Cohen (1975). In the model the dependent variable was the client domain score for one of the structure or content variables; the demographic variable was entered into the model after the acquaintance domain score, in order to determine if it explained any additional variance in the dependent variable over the acquaintance domain score. In no case was a significant relationship found between differentiation on cognitive structure or construct content and a demographic variable. Thus, the degree of differentiation of the client and acquaintance subsystems appeared to be unrelated to age, sex, years of clinical experience, degree, orientation, discipline, or recruitment group.

DISCUSSION

This study provided evidence of differences in client and acquaintance construal in all three areas examined. Constructs were more applicable when applied to the same domain from which they had been derived than to the opposite domain. The client-construing subsystem exhibited greater cognitive differentiation and hierarchical organization than the
comparison constructs would load even more highly on this factor. This speculation is not supported by the data, however. The mean number of comparison constructs loading on the emotional stability factor fell between the mean number of client and acquaintance constructs that loaded on that factor.

In Bender's study (Tully, 1976), more differences in construct content between the domains of client and acquaintance construal were found than in the current study. Unlike the present study, Bender assessed construct content by coding constructs into predetermined categories. Most likely, the more numerous differences found in the Bender study were due to differences in the dimensions examined as well as in methodology. Bender found that client constructs were more likely to involve psychiatric terminology, while acquaintance constructs tended to involve affect and self-involvement. These dimensions were not examined in the present study. Instead, a set of dimensions was chosen that represented factors repeatedly found in people's ratings of their peers. The relatively large numbers of high correlations between the elicited constructs and the supplied factor markers indicate that therapists did indeed use these dimensions in their construal processes. In fact, several subjects spontaneously commented on the similarity between their elicited constructs and the factor markers. The results can perhaps be interpreted as supporting the position that these dimensions represent general features of how people construe others, independently of the type of person. In retrospect, it seems that these dimensions may be precisely those that were least likely to bring out differences on construct content between the two domains. Further research should explore possible differences in other dimensions of content than those examined here.

The technique of assessing personal construct content by means of the correlations of the construct with a set of constructs supplied to all subjects, the standard construct method (Soldz, 1986), deserves further investigation by Rep Grid researchers. Unlike coding techniques for measuring construct content (Duck, 1973; Landfield, 1971), the standard construct method allows the measurement of a construct's meaning to be determined from the way the subject actually uses that construct. If a standardized set of supplied constructs could be developed, construct content could be systematically compared across studies using this technique.

The third set of analyses relevant to the question of distinct subsystems are the cognitive structure results. It was found that the client domain was more differentiated and hierarchically organized than the acquaintance domain. The finding regarding differentiation is in agreement with that of Bender (cited in Tully, 1976), while the hierarchical organization result contradicts Bender's claim of fragmentation in his subject's client-con-
struing subsystems. Most likely, the relative lack of relationship between client-domain constructs in Bender's study is a sign of greater cognitive differentiation rather than fragmentation or lack of hierarchical organization.

The existence of different structural properties for the two domains provides further support for the existence of different client and acquaintance subsystems. These findings suggest that the professional client-construing subsystem of therapists is more organized and articulated than is the acquaintance-construing system. Therapists make finer distinctions among their clients than they do among their acquaintances. Yet these discriminations appear to be guided by a set of hierarchically organized constructs, preventing the greater differentiation from resulting in conceptual chaos. It seems likely that this finding results from the greater attention paid by therapists to understanding the fine details of their clients' lives and personal difficulties. These cognitive structure results must be interpreted with caution, however, because only modest support has so far been adduced for CHISQ as a measure of hierarchical organization (Landfield & Schmittiel, 1983), while there appears to be a computational difficulty with FIC that make its interpretation difficult (Soldz & Soldz, in press).

Despite these qualifications, the results of this study indicate that there are noticeable differences in all three domains examined, providing strong support for the existence of distinct construct subsystems for client and acquaintance construal (in primarily) psychodynamically oriented therapists engaged in individual therapy. No evidence was found in this study that the degree of differentiation of client and acquaintance subsystems is systematically related to such therapist factors as sex, age, years of experience, educational level, theoretical orientation, clinical discipline, or recruitment group. These negative findings indicate that subsystem differentiation is a general feature of the construct systems of therapists similar to those in the present study. In order to determine the generalizability of these findings, studies of other groups of therapists are required. Research is also necessary in order to clarify the exact nature of the differences in construal and their possible clinical and social significance.

One set of questions worthy of further research concerns individual differences among therapists: Do therapists with more differentiated acquaintance- and client-construing subsystems form better or worse relationships with their clients? Mishler (1984), in a study of medical interviews, found that these interviews tended to be characterized by a systematic struggle between the medical diagnostic perspective of the doctor and the 'lifeworld' perspective of the patient. It seems likely that a similar struggle occurs in psychotherapy between the therapist's professional mode of construing personal difficulties, which usually emphasizes self-exploration and the verbalization of psychic conflicts, and the client's concentration on his/her suffering and the desire for relief. In fact, Light (1980), in a study of psychodynamically oriented inpatient psychiatrists, found that just such a conflict occurred. The psychiatrists tended to ignore the content of patients' complaints, interpreting them, rather, as indicators of psychodynamic conflicts in the patients. One possibility is that clients approach psychotherapy with a construct system more akin to the therapist's acquaintance, rather than client, construal system. If this possibility were borne out by further research, knowledge of these differences might help therapists understand differences in perspective that occur with their clients without engaging in prejudicial "blaming of the victim" for not being sufficiently motivated.

It is also interesting to speculate that certain issues in clinical theory might become clarified by considering the differences in client and acquaintance construal. For example, can countertransference be related to a temporary breakdown of the distinction between domains? Is it possible that certain of the institutional arrangements of psychotherapy aid in the maintenance of the distinction between domains, thus alleviating therapist anxiety?

The present results suggest that it would be of benefit to therapists, especially those in training, to be exposed to these questions. Greater clarity as to the nature of the learning and socialization process in which they are engaged might result. Further, such discussion might help trainees become more conscious of how professional training affects their nontherapeutic relationships. Personal experience indicates that this is an area of concern to many budding therapists, and greater awareness of these issues might relieve some of the anxiety that is inevitably involved in becoming a psychotherapist.

REFERENCES


