

Running Head: SIGMUND FREUD VERSUS GEORGE KELLY

Sigmund Freud versus George Kelly: Comparison of Psychoanalysis  
and Phenomenology in the Case Study of “Niko”

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Abstract

This paper compares two theoretical approaches in psychology and explains how they may be applied to personality analysis. The theoretical approaches used are psychoanalysis and phenomenology, specifically, the theories of Sigmund Freud and George Kelly. While psychoanalysis concentrates on processes of the unconscious mind in relation to personality, phenomenology suggests that a person's personality is the result of their conscious thoughts and feelings. Using a case study of "Niko," his personality will be examined according to these theories. By comparing the theories of psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, and phenomenologist, George Kelly, specific differences between the two approaches to personality become clear.

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*Introduction*

The assumptions of two theorists will be applied to illustrate how personality can be interpreted differently. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach will be compared and contrasted with George Kelly's phenomenological approach, commonly referred to as personal construct theory. Using a case study of “Niko,” these theories will be illustrated in the analysis of his personality.

Personality, according to Freud, is dependent upon the experiences in infancy and early childhood. Certain personality traits are characteristic to situations and stages in our development. How we pass through these stages determines whether we will have psychological issues throughout life. These issues and our thoughts are the results of our unconscious mind. The mind, Freud suggested, is made up of three parts: the id, ego, and superego. These parts are in constant turmoil; our solutions to these conflicts result in our overt behaviors. In order for the mind to function it must have motivation and energy, Freud referred to these phenomena as our libido.

Kelly focused on an individual's personal experiences, conscious thoughts, and feelings in explaining personality. A person's individual experiences and cognition's result in what is called personal constructs. Constructs are our views and ideas about the world. Kelly formed the personal construct theory. His theory is explained by how a person interprets his or her past experiences. For example, imagine a person is involved in a terrible car accident as a child. The child survives but spends several months in a hospital recovering. The way in which this

situation is interpreted becomes a construct for this individual. This person could determine that they were very lucky to live and they feel life is very precious, therefore they become very cautious wearing seatbelts or helmets while riding a bike and they are aware of their surroundings at all times. This is one possible construct; another may be that this person feels that they were given a second chance at life, life is short and they want to experience life to the fullest. They may bungee jump, sky dive, and see life as a big adventure. For every experience in our life, our interpretations become our constructs through which we live and view life.

### *Methods*

In order to analyze Niko's personality, a psychoanalyst needs to acquire information from childhood. Niko is asked to recall any situations from childhood that come to mind. Freud called the act of expressing whatever comes to mind as free association. The psychotherapist focuses on these experiences as being relevant to a patient's personality. If Niko recalls when his father moved out of the house and left him crying at the front door, this may indicate why Niko has resentment toward his father in adulthood. Freud also relies on patients sharing problems with the therapist in an attempt to relieve the patient from some of their emotional stress. This is called a "talking cure." The idea of the talking cure is that when an individual talks about their problems, such as relationship problems, they feel better afterwards than if they had not talked about their problems at all. Eventually transference is present in which an emotional relationship is formed with the therapist. Niko is now comfortable sharing his thoughts openly and honestly. As more time goes by the relationship becomes stronger and the patient feels like their therapist is more like a friend who cares about them and their feelings. Freud was especially concerned with aggression and sexual drive. Sessions with Niko indicate a

significant amount of aggression and anger that is aimed toward his father. Niko's parents were divorced when he was 5 years old. His father moved leaving Niko to stay with his mother, older sister, and younger brother. His father remarried twice, conceiving a child with each wife. Niko expressed resentment towards his father because the children from his other wives were given adequate care and attention from his father. Abandonment and betrayal are issues with Niko because his father has not played an active role in his life. Freud also looked for symbols used in thoughts and dreams that could explain personality traits. Consistent with the aggressive nature of Niko the psychotherapist can expect vivid accounts of aggression present in his dreams. In such a dream Niko recalls being a vampire and terrorizing a city. Niko destroyed buildings and hurt people. Niko stated that dreams such as his vampire dream are enjoyable because they allow him to be powerful and have control over people. A psychotherapist may see these dreams as an outlet for Niko to express anger and aggression without actually being destructive and hurting people. Niko may enjoy having control over other people's feelings in an attempt to compensate for a lack of control in his relationship with his father.

Phenomenologists, on the other hand, dismiss any ideas related to the unconscious mind. Rather, phenomenology psychologist George Kelly found that personality was largely dependent upon a person's constructs, or their ideas about life that come from interpretations of personal experiences. Examples of some constructs are weak versus strong, good versus bad or aggressive versus non-aggressive. A method known as the Role Construct Repertory Test is often used to assess one's personal construct system. Also known as the REP test, an individual is asked to think of three people important to him or her. Of the three people, how are two of them similar but different from the third person? For example, Niko states three people

important in his life are his sister, his brother, and his girlfriend. He describes his brother and sister as non-aggressive and non-confrontational; however, he describes his girlfriend as non-aggressive and non-confrontational. Because the characteristics used to describe these three people in his life are aggressive and confrontational, some of his personal constructs are aggressive versus non-aggressive and confrontational versus non-confrontational. Kelly theorized that constructs such as these reveal how Niko views the world. Constructs that play a larger role than others are called chronically accessible constructs. These constructs determine our reactions in certain situations. For Niko the idea of being powerful and intimidating is chronically accessible; therefore, in every encounter with another person, he ponders who is in charge and who has more power. In explaining one's personality Kelly suggests that a therapist must take into consideration the patient's experiences throughout life. It is important for the therapist not to pass judgement and to try to see the experiences through the eyes of the patient. Niko's therapist might try to imagine what it was like having his father leave at an early age and having to live with his mother who Niko views as emotionally absent and socially unacceptable.

### *Niko's Personality*

Stages of development are critical for the explanation of personality from a psychoanalytic standpoint. Freud concluded that from infancy to childhood we pass through stages of development. Effective maturation in each of these stages will pass one without psychological damages to the next level. However, if for some reason one cannot overcome obstacles within a stage, fixation occurs at that stage. Stressful events or feelings result in regression to that stage. The stages of development are the oral stage, anal stage, phallic stage, and the genital stage. The oral stage is present from birth to eighteen months. During this stage

all pleasure is focused orally on the mouth: for example, eating and sucking. At this age we are “dependent on our parents or caretakers to provide for us. Freud would suggest that in order to prevent fixations at this stage the caretaker must adequately take care of the infant’s needs, but not necessarily attend to every cry. This is not always the case, therefore leading to two extremes that cause an oral fixation. First, an uncaring or unreliable parent may cause the infant to develop a mistrust of his world. Niko’s mother was fairly young and inexperienced as a mother. She often seemed more concerned with her personal relationship with Niko’s father than for Niko’s needs as an infant. There was little consistency in feeding time, and Niko was left to cry until he wore himself out. For Niko it is evident that fixation occurred at this stage because of his underlying issues with abandonment and betrayal. He also is very independent relying only on himself to achieve satisfaction. Any form of betrayal or abandonment from friends, family or partner would be damning to his character.

Kelly would suggest that Niko’s issues with abandonment and betrayal come from some of his childhood experiences. Niko views the world as unfair and feels that the only person he can depend on is himself. Niko’s experiences have taught him that the people he should be able to count on, such as his family, are not always reliable. Kelly theorized that ideas such as the world being unfair are just one of the many constructs that determine our outlook on life and our personality. Niko’s interpretations of his father leaving at a young age have resulted in a mistrust of people in general. Niko has chosen to approach relationships cautiously attempting to prevent feelings of betrayal. Kelly explained behavior such as this as constructive alternativism, meaning that an individual chooses specific constructs throughout their life experiences. These constructs are continued throughout similar situations just as Niko is

untrusting of all people.

The next stage of fixation can occur in the anal stage. This stage ranges from eighteen months to about three years of age. During this stage of development children are learning self-control and obedience. If parents exert too much control at this stage, or not enough control, fixation will occur. For example, if parents are controlling and strict and become angry when the child cries or disobeys, a person may develop characteristics such as obsessiveness, compulsiveness, or submission to authority. If parents allow their children to do what they want when they want a fixation may also occur where characteristics may include a person with little or no self-control, and defiance of authority. Niko also expresses a fixation at this stage. Niko's parents were still married at this stage; however, they were preoccupied with the problems in the marriage. Obedience and respect toward authority were not properly taught. Niko shows characteristics of anal personality especially in his defiant attitude toward authority. He has little respect for authority. He feels control by taking it away from others.

One of Niko's constructs is a lack of respect for authority. Niko views people in positions of authority as controlling and unfair. According to Kelly's personal construct theory Niko could have viewed authority figures as people who keep him safe or are looking out for his best interest. However, Niko has interpreted authority figures differently. From his experience, he has viewed his teachers, policemen, and parents as people who try to control his actions, and make his life more difficult. For instance, if Niko were to be pulled over in a traffic stop, he would not think of the policeman as enforcing the speed limit or keeping the roads safe, he would immediately believe that the policeman is targeting him as a troublemaker and wanting to harass him. This idea that all authority figures are terrible people cause Niko to talk

disrespectfully and behave negatively around people in authority over him. Kelly's personal construct theory is consistent with Niko's defiant attitude toward authority

The third stage described by Freud is the phallic stage. At about three to five years of age, children realize that boys and girls are different. In this stage both boys and girls understand that their sex organs are different. Freud claimed that boys fear castration from their fathers in a fight for their mother's attention and love. Attempting to lessen this fear, the boy identifies with his father and adopts his characteristics. Psychological themes in this stage are sexuality, love fear and jealousy. Morality is also developed at this stage. A personality that is considered phallic would be fixated at this point expressing personality traits such as sexual promiscuity or asexual tendencies. This stage also contributes to expression in masculinity and femininity. Somewhere Niko experienced fixation at this stage. Fixation is suggested due to characteristics of jealousy and over expression of masculinity. Niko has been in a serious relationship for four years. A recurring problem in this relationship is jealousy. He feels his girlfriend is flirtatious and too friendly toward others. Jealousy occurs because his girlfriend gives attention to others that Niko feels only he deserves. A psychotherapist may explain Niko's masculinity and aggressiveness as a means to compensate for the lack of a male figure in childhood. Since Niko did not have a paternal role model. He could not sufficiently experience castration anxiety. Therefore, adequate development at this stage could not be reached. Morals are put into context by taking on the values of the same sex parent. In his case dad was absent suggesting that morals were not sufficiently taught.

Just as Niko's constructs have resulted in issues with abandonment, betrayal, and defiant attitudes toward authority, he also has a construct for jealousy and aggressiveness. Niko's

experiences with these issues involve his father's relationship with his other family, and a lack of presence in Niko's life. Niko's father chose to be active in his other children's lives but not in Niko's. Niko also experienced his mother spending time with her boyfriends instead of him and his siblings. Niko interpreted this as his loved ones ignoring his presence and enjoying the presence of other people. Niko craved for attention in his childhood and now he seeks attention from his girlfriend. When she is attentive to other males, Niko becomes jealous. Kelly would also suggest that Niko has a construct for aggressiveness. Niko expresses his anger verbally and sometimes physically, punches walls, slamming objects down etc. From Niko's experiences with anger, he has interpreted aggressiveness as away to make his feelings known and releasing tension that has built up. Kelly's theory states that Niko has chosen to be aggressive instead of passive in expressing anger.

In the final stage of Freud's personality theory we reach maturity. This stage is called the genital stage. This stage is not like the others. Shortly after puberty we should reach a mature understanding about sexuality and about life. As for Niko, he experienced fixations at other stages therefore not allowing him to reach this stage.

#### *Diagnosis and Therapy/Behavior Change*

Personality analysis of Niko has exposed some obvious issues in which Niko may benefit in resolving. Both the psychoanalytic and phenomenological theories agree that Niko expresses aggression, defiance toward authority, and jealousy. Other characteristics of Niko's are issues with abandonment, trust and betrayal. Each of these causes unneeded stress and ultimately lead to problems in future relationships and also in his physical health. Each theorist has different techniques in behavior modification just as they do in explaining behavior itself.

Freud finds the root of Niko's conflicts as fixations occurring at the oral, anal and phallic stages of development. Although Niko gave insight to these problems, he had not recognized them since they are the actions of his unconscious mind. A psychotherapist will encourage sessions in which Niko will express more of his thoughts and feelings. The goal of the therapists is to make him more aware of his unconscious processes. By informing Niko of how his mind works, he will cope with feelings that manifest from his childhood. The therapist may encourage Niko to keep a journal of his dreams. After a dream he should write everything he remembers about his dreams, especially anything that caused feelings of stress, anger, jealousy etc. This journal will be shared in meetings with the therapists to find meaning behind his dreams. Armed with knowledge and an understanding of where his feelings come from Niko will slowly adjust and adapt to these negative feelings.

Kelly would suggest that it is important for the therapist to understand what Niko has experienced throughout life. The therapist must try to imagine what the world is like through Niko's eyes. The therapist also needs to help Niko understand his personal construct system. By using the REP test explained previously, both Niko and the therapist can concentrate on his construct system and his chronically accessible constructs. The idea is to acknowledge where Niko's views come from and then explain them. For example as stated earlier, one of Niko's constructs is aggressive versus non-aggressive. It was concluded that Niko's aggressiveness has come from experiences where being aggressive has released anger and tension; therefore, Niko becomes aggressive when he becomes angry and views other people and situations as either aggressive or non-aggressive. An understanding of Niko's constructs allow for change if Niko interprets his ideas as needing to change. Niko realizes that he is jealous of his girlfriend's mal~

friends; however, Niko's experience is that his girlfriend has not been unfaithful and has been dependable, therefore, Niko may develop a new construct and not be jealous of his girlfriend's relationships.

### *Conclusion*

Sigmund Freud and George Kelly have laid a foundation for personality theories and analysis of overt behaviors. Each has very different ideas as to where our behaviors come from and why behaviors are committed in the first place. The psychoanalytic theory of Freud suggests that all behaviors come from our unconscious mind. The personal construct theory of Kelly concludes that our interpretations of past experiences determine how we view our world. Niko is one individual whose personality can be split into two directions. The only agreement among the two is the actual personality traits Niko possesses, and the idea that childhood experiences play a role in each view. Whether his issues with abandonment come from the oral stage or from experiences of loved ones leaving him; the issue itself can be recognized and modified. For all of his personality traits, positive or negative, each theorist has a conclusion as to why they exist. Each view is complete with cause and effect. As different as each theory is, they both contribute to personality analysis. As concluded by Freud, Niko has experienced fixations in early childhood, just as Kelly explains Niko's behavior as the way in which he chooses to react to situations dependent upon interpretations of past experiences.

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TO: Craig Hill DEPT: Psychology

FROM: Chris Consultant

DATE: Friday, November 22, 2002

RE: Sarah Student

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*Case study paper*

Sarah asked that the Writing Center send you the following conference summary:

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Chris