

Revisiting Kelly's Personal Construct Theory and Reynold's & Gutman's Means-End Chain Model

--Mediated by Hinkle's Laddering Method?--

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1. Introduction

Personal construct theory, PCT, (Kelly, 1955), the laddering method, LM, (Hinkle, 1965), and Means-end chain model, MCM, (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Reynolds & Whitlark, 1995) are perhaps the most internationally known methods for eliciting mental states or knowledge of clinical clients, consumers and technical experts. Among these, LM seems to have played a pivotal role, mediating PCT to MCM.

However, upon a closer look, we learn that it is neither a successor nor an extension of the Kelly's theory. Moreover, the MCM applied the idea of laddering probe with little intention of inheriting PCM. This should not be taken to mean that PCM lacks any practical value.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the three approaches in terms of stepwise mental probing. into ideas. terms of idea-elicitation methods. the interest of works stimulate proper treatment of the rich concept of personal constructs, on the one hand, and the critical examination of values MCM aims at.

2. Basic standpoints

Kelly proposed PCT in the area of clinical psychology to assist clients in reconstructing his/her troubled mental model depicted by personal constructs through introspection.

Hinkle, inspired by Kelly's theory, developed a hypothesis about clients' resistance to change that would increase along the construct hierarchy. Laddering by "why important" probe was a method for eliciting upper constructs.

Provided that the laddering is effective in identifying "upper" mental entities, its application to consumers' opinions and attitudes would clarify the links between product's attributes (means) and the high-end values with intervening functional/psychological consequences. This was the motive that underlay MCM.

Now an examination of theoretical linkages among PCT, LM and MCM is in order, provided that each has stimulated many subsequent works.

3. Theoretical linkages

The construct system of PCT embraces both nested and embedded ordinal relationships among constructs that may be reversed for the anticipatory convenience of the owner. In contrast, LM deals only with the nested linkages, holding that "why" and "how" probes respectively elicit a super- and a sub-ordinate implications of a construct.

For changes in construct systems, while Kelly emphasized permeability-impermeability, core-peripheral and tight-loose dimensions, Hinkle focused on vertical linkages along on the supposition that upper constructs have more

implications than lower ones. Ironically, Hinkle's theoretical attempt on the change in the construct system had far less impact on subsequent researches than his elicitation tool, LM.

PCT influenced MCM via Repertory Grid Test (RGT), an instrument for PCT developed by Kelly himself, for eliciting initial distinctions application of LM to which were claimed to reveal their links to Rokeach-type (1973) personal values (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Nevertheless, there is no sufficient theoretical explanations about the validity of the "why-important" probing would lead one from product or brand attributes to high-end values (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984, 1988).

Perhaps, few would doubt the importance of personal values in guiding behaviors, both researchers and practitioners should listen to the caveat cast by Fischhoff (1991) concerning the measurability of them.

Because of causal schema people possess (e.g., Minsky, 1985), LM or other probing techniques (e.g., Morgan, et. al, 1992) will produce chain-like responses. But, how do we verify that they constitute coherent personal values. The need for verification is clear particularly in view of various strategies, other than simple "why" probing, suggested by Reynolds and Whitlark (1995).

In closing, a note seems in order, calling for a revival of the original rich conceptualization of personal constructs, particularly in relation to marketing where brand-switch or brand-adherence, diffusion of new products, the power of WOM are of great importance. The plasticity and the sociality of the construct systems (Kelly, 1955) and resistance to change (Hinkle, 1965) seem to deserve critical but

constructive reevaluations, but not in dogmatic sense.

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