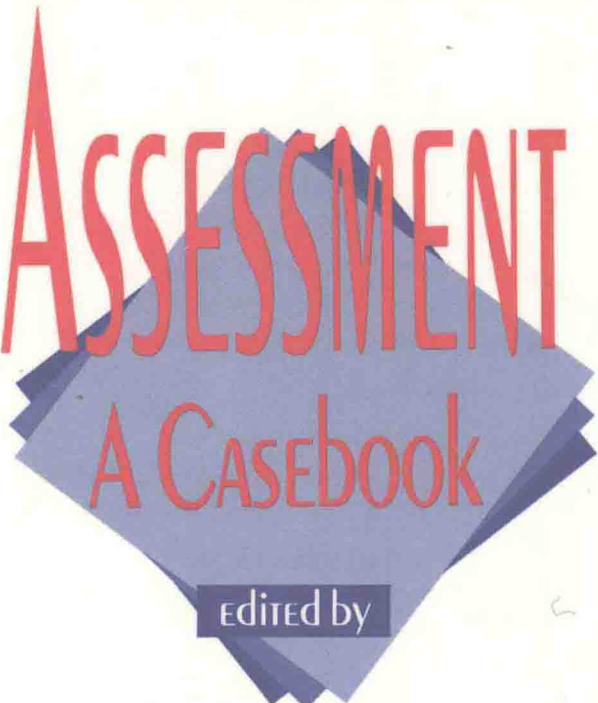


CONSTRUCTIVIST ASSESSMENT



A CASEBOOK

edited by

GREG J. NEIMEYER

THE **CPCS** COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST CASEBOOK SERIES
VOLUME 2

CONSTRUCTIVIST ASSESSMENT A CASEBOOK

edited by
GREG J. NEIMEYER

THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST CASEBOOK SERIES



SAGE Publications

International Educational and Professional Publisher
Newbury Park London New Delhi

Copyright © 1993 by Sage Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address:



SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Newbury Park, California 91320

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Constructivist assessment : a casebook / Greg J. Neimeyer.

p. cm. —(The counseling psychologist casebook series; 2)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8039-4830-1. —ISBN 0-8039-4831-X (pb.)

1. Counseling. 2. Personality assessment. 3. Constructivism
(Psychology) I. Neimeyer, Greg J. II. Series.

BF637.C6C563 1993

158'.3—dc20

92-33021

93 94 95 96 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sage Production Editor: Tara S. Mead

Contents

1. Defining the Boundaries of Constructivist Assessment
Greg J. Neimeyer and Robert A. Neimeyer 1
2. Constructivist Assessment: A Developmental-Epistemic Perspective
William J. Lyddon and Darlys J. Alford 31
3. Constructivist Approaches to the Measurement of Meaning
Robert A. Neimeyer 58
4. Listening to What My Clients and I Say:
Content Analysis Categories and Scales
Linda L. Viney 104
5. Convergent Lines of Assessment: Systemic and
Constructivist Contributions
*Guillem Feixas, Harry G. Procter,
and Greg J. Neimeyer* 143

6. The Personal Narrative in the Communal Construction of Self and Life Issues	
<i>Lisa Tsoi Hoshmand</i>	179
7. Constructivist Assessment: What and When	
<i>Robert A. Neimeyer and Greg J. Neimeyer</i>	206
Author Index	224
Subject Index	230
About the Authors	234

1

Defining the Boundaries of Constructivist Assessment

GREG J. NEIMEYER

ROBERT A. NEIMEYER

PSYCHOLOGICAL and human sciences have been undergoing a period of critical reappraisal regarding their commitments to what constitutes science. Derived largely from the positivistic worldview, this account of science has imposed significant restrictions on the conduct of inquiry within the clinical and counseling professions (Howard, 1985; Mahoney, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1984, 1991). Awareness of these restrictions has prompted recent efforts to harvest meaningful modes of inquiry from disciplines less wedded to objectivist stances. As a result, prominent scholarship has been directed toward issues of self-agency, hermeneutics, and theories of intentional action and narrative knowing (Hoshmand, 1989; Howard, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1988), approaches that are broadly consistent with the rapidly emerging field of constructivist counseling and psychotherapy (Carlsen, 1988; Efran, Lukens, M., & Lukens, R., 1990; Mahoney, 1991; Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988; Neimeyer, R. & Neimeyer, G., 1987).

Despite their diversity, members of this interdisciplinary family of constructivist orientations all share a common premise: We do not have direct

access to a singular, stable, and fully knowable external reality. All of our understandings instead are contextually embedded, interpersonally forged, and necessarily limited. Founded on the idea that "humans actively create and construe their personal realities" (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988, p. 200), constructivist theories have spawned a distinctive array of innovative methods designed to "fit the study of humans as active, interpreting agents" (Borgen, 1984, p. 458).

Following from their distinctive beliefs, constructivist approaches orient toward fundamentally different types of assessment strategies. Emphasis is placed, for example, on the primacy of personal meaning, the active role of the person as a co-creator of meaning, and the self-organized and developmentally progressive nature of our knowledge structures (see Lyddon & Alford, Chapter 2, this volume). Constructivist traditions emphasize processes of knowing and orient toward assessing the viability (utility) as opposed to the validity (truth) of an individual's unique worldview.

This chapter discusses each of these features and develops the ways in which they articulate with broader changes occurring within our allied mental health professions. Divided into two sections, the chapter first reviews some common assumptions of constructivist traditions and then illustrates several of their distinctive contributions to assessment by comparing constructivist with more traditional forms of cognitive-behavioral assessment.

This comparison sets the stage for subsequent chapters by describing and distinguishing features of constructivist assessment and by laying the conceptual groundwork for the assimilation of these methods into informed professional practice. In Chapter 2, for example, Lyddon and Alford call attention to the critical developmental processes that undergird constructivist orientations and illustrate the convergence of multiple strategies in framing a relationship-sensitive approach to assessment. R. Neimeyer (Chapter 3) extends this discussion by illustrating a variety of vehicles for the measurement of personal meaning, assessment strategies that attend to structural and process-oriented aspects of personal construction. A complementary focus on the qualitative assessment of content constitutes Chapter 4, where Viney richly illustrates diverse content analytic schemes. Broader patterns of interpersonal construction are the focus of Feixas, Procter, and G. Neimeyer's Chapter 5, where they illustrate the convergence of family systems and constructivist orientations in a variety

of innovative assessment techniques. And finally, extending these themes more broadly still, Hoshmand (Chapter 6) attends to the role of personal narratives as they are forged within the communal process of social construction. The volume concludes (Chapter 7) with a review of the central, common features of constructivist assessment.

Taken collectively, the chapters that comprise this volume illustrate diverse applications of assessment and intervention strategies, strategies that nonetheless converge on the central assumptions of a constructivist position. As Polkinghorne (1984) noted, "It takes a great effort for a discipline to move from the recognition of the need to use alternative systems of inquiry to the production of clear descriptions of what these systems will look like" (p. 427), and this volume represents a tentative effort toward accomplishing that goal.

Constructive Assumptions

We are seeing in our lifetimes the collapse of the objectivist worldview that dominated the modern era, the worldview that gave people faith in the absolute and permanent rightness of certain beliefs and values. The worldview emerging in its place is constructivist. If we operate from this worldview we see all information and all stories as human creations that fit, more or less well, with our experience and within a universe that remains always beyond us and always mysterious. We honor the search for truth and knowledge and values but regard what we find as the truth and knowledge and values of people—of people in our time. (Anderson, 1990, p. 268)

Constructivism refers to a family of interrelated theories that challenge realist and objectivist versions of science. Although contemporary versions of constructivism reflect diverse historical influences (see Mahoney, 1988a, 1991; Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988), they share a common assumptive framework that emphasizes the necessarily limited and fallible nature of all our quests to know. Foremost among these assumptions are beliefs that human beings (a) are oriented actively toward a meaningful understanding of the world in which they live, (b) are denied direct access to any external reality, and (c) are continuously in the process of development and change. According to this perspective, being human necessarily entails a partial, situated "effort after meaning" (Bartlett, 1932), a position

that restores to prominence processes of self-agency in human action (Howard, 1985). These efforts are marked by attempts to represent and comprehend a reality symbolically, however, that can never be fully comprehended. Instead we can have little more than indirect, mediated, and partial access to a series of transformed and forever shifting "realities," flickering images given shape and substance by the very processes that yield them. Attention to each of these human features, the fundamental orientation toward meaning, the denial of direct access to reality, and the continuous processes of change distinguish the substance and style of constructivist assessment.

Making Meaning

Man has, as it were, discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared to other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality. . . . Man lives in a symbolic universe. (Cassirer, 1972)

Constructivism is founded on the premise of meaning making; being human entails active efforts to interpret experience, seeking purpose and significance in the events that surround us. "We seem to be neurologically 'wired' to classify our experiences," reflected Mahoney (1982, p. 92), "and to transform the 'buzzing booming confusion' of sensation into some codified and dynamic representation of the world." It is this drive toward meaning, this effort to forge significance and purpose from elements of experience, that typifies the human enterprise and that serves as the cornerstone of constructivist thinking.

Efforts to understand processes of meaning making are the common cause of constructivist thinkers who have combed diverse forms of human activity for evidence of symbolic representation. Within psychology, many of these efforts have converged on processes of *languageing*, attempts to signify experience in semantic space. "For better or worse, we live in a world of language," observed Efran et al. (1990, pp. 31-32), noting that "it is in languageing that meanings are created" (see also Korzybski, 1933).

Languageing can be defined broadly, extending beyond the pale of spoken representation, across verbal and nonverbal, behavioral and cog-

nitive, conscious and unconscious terrains (Maturana, 1980). Even within its narrower confines, however, meaning making takes rich and diverse forms. Vehicles for introducing structure and organization into the flow of experience include such processes as metaphorical representation and narrative transactions.

Sarbin (1986), for example, proposed a narratory principle that holds that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and act according to narrative structures, a position strongly supported by studies of narrative knowing (Polkinghorne, 1988). We routinely develop stories or accounts of significant life events, changes, and loss, for example, in an effort to infuse these occurrences with some coherence and meaning (Harvey, 1989; Harvey, Orbuch, Weber, Merback, & Alt, 1992). "We live in and through stories," Mair (1988, p. 127) noted. "They conjure worlds. We do not know the world other than as story world. Stories inform life" (see also Hoshmand, Chapter 6, this volume; Mair, 1989a, 1989b).

Like stories, metaphors provide potent vehicles for symbolic representation. Metaphorical knowing permeates therapeutic interventions (Bryant, Katz, Bevcars, R., & Bevcars, D., 1988) and has served as the basis for the development of *cognitive linguistics*, a constructivist discipline dedicated to the study of metaphorical understanding (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Like other constructivist theories, the essential argument of cognitive linguistics is that our constructions of the world emerge from our interactions with it. These interactions are constrained by our corporality, by the size and shape of our bodies, the nature and limitation of our movements, and the physical concomitants of being human. Gradually this physical embodiment is extended to other domains as we develop our capacities for abstractions and cognition. At first, when a novel experience is encountered for which no existing class or category of understanding is available, the event remains unclassified and unassimilated. It acquires meaning as a "structural coupling" (Maturana, 1980) occurs between aspects of that experience and aspects of preexisting constructions. "The recognition of partial similarity on some construct provides the basis for analogy, and if linguistic translation is necessary, the partial similarity is expressed in metaphor" (Sarbin, 1986, p. 4). So, for example, in helping a divorcing client anticipate his impending experience, we might speak of the "emotional roller coaster" that he can expect in the coming months, importing a physical referent to help structure and organize his anticipations of events in the emotional realm.

"In all aspects of life," observed Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 158), "we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously or unconsciously, by means of metaphor."

One of the clearest descriptions of the process of *meaning making* was detailed by Kelly (1955) in his *Psychology of Personal Constructs*. Kelly stipulated that individuals attend to recurring aspects of their experience and abstract salient perceived similarities and differences from among these events, fashioning categories or forging distinctions that he called *personal constructs*. Personal constructs are bipolar distinctions (e.g. tall vs. short; shy vs. outgoing; religious vs. not religious) that, once formed, serve to channelize subsequent anticipations, perceptions, and actions (see Kelly's [1955] fundamental postulate). The very process of forging such distinctions brings events into phenomenal existence, enabling them to stand out against an otherwise seamless blur of events. Constructivist accounts therefore regard *perceived distinctions* as elemental to the process of meaning making; by noting differences, we literally call events into existence for ourselves. Consistent with its Latin origin (*existere*, meaning to "stand out against"), existence presupposes distinction. "To say that something exists," noted Efran et al. (1990, p. 36), "simply means that it has been discriminated from a background. A 'this' has been separated from a 'that'."

Such distinctions enable us to navigate our way through an ocean of experience in vessels of our own making. They allow us to impose structure and impute significance to the events of our world. In all its varied forms, the processes of meaning making constitute the very heart of being human. "We are language-related, symbol-borne, and story-sustained creatures," noted Fowler (1984, p. 50). "We do not live long or well without meaning."

Making Reality

Meaning making is central to constructivist conceptualizations of the person (Carlsen, 1988; Kegan, 1982). Like Kelly (1955), Bateson (1972) regarded meaning making as an active process of construction that owes no direct allegiance to the contours of the external world. "The division of the perceived universe into parts and wholes is convenient and may be

necessary, but no necessity determines how it shall be done" (Bateson, 1979, p. 38). The distinctions that we forge are not prefabricated givens delivered directly to our senses by an external world; "man creates his own ways of seeing the world in which he lives," proffered Kelly (1955, p. 12), "the world does not create them for him."

Even in the realm of sensation, long regarded as the domain best suited to a realist understanding of the individual as a passive recipient of external events, active processes of construction are increasingly evident. In contrast to the direct and immediate access to the world that our visual system may appear to give us, for instance, active organismic processes are clear participants in the construction of what we see. Light, for example, may bathe the retinal surface of our eyes, but it does not directly penetrate beneath it, so its properties alone cannot determine what we take as perceptual givens. Nor does it directly trigger neurochemical activity that fully determines vision in any immediate line of efficient causation. Rather it joins the ongoing pattern of activity that is continuously occurring within our visual system, the vast majority of which is self-referential. As Mahoney (1991, p. 101) noted, "Numerically speaking, there are 10 motor (efferent) neurons for every sensory (afferent) receptor; and for every motor neuron, there are 10,000 interneurons (neurons that connect only with other neurons). If we accept the traditional notion that one's sensory receptors constitute one's contact with the outside world, we are forced to conclude that one is much more extensively connected with oneself than with the external environment (at a ratio of 100,000 to 1)." These quick calculations lend palpable support to Hayek's (1952, pp. 6-7) earlier observation that "much that we believe to know about the external world is, in fact, knowledge about ourselves" (see also Weimer, 1977).

Evidence such as this challenges the classical subject-object dualism, blurring the boundaries between what is viewed as "internal" and "external" to the person and underscoring the essential theory-ladenness of all our observations. Gone is the high-contrast distinction between theory and fact, and with it the assurance of any eventual one-to-one correspondence between our interpretations and features of a fixed and stable external world (Lauden, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1984, 1988). Preference instead shifts to the mediated, contextualized, and transactional nature of the relationship between the individual and the world.

Importantly, however, the utility of our perceptions is not necessarily limited by their correspondence to some presumed "objective" reality. In

distinguishing properties of a gas (a concept meaningful as distinct from solids or liquids), for example, we frequently study the relationship between two other invented concepts: temperature and pressure. The covariation of these can provide a reliable (consistent) index of gaseous properties, but this fact in no way verifies the "reality" of any of these concepts. "That pressure and temperature are real properties of real entities or that their measurements provide us an unmediated view of the natural world as it is does not follow from their covariation" (Longrino, 1990).

Because neither our perceptions nor their utility is tied directly to features of the external world, any event is subject to a wide variety of alternative constructions. It is this capacity that offers equal promise to personal and scientific pursuits. As Kelly (1970, p. 1) remarked, "Howsoever the quest for truth will turn out in the end, the events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive. This is not to say that one construction is as good as any other. . . . But it does remind us that all our present perceptions are open to question and reconsideration and it does broadly suggest that even the most obvious occurrences of everyday life might appear utterly transformed if we were inventive enough to construe them differently." This position, dubbed *constructive alternativism* (Kelly, 1955), is a cornerstone of constructivist thinking, and it highlights the contingency of observation on human construction. Albert Einstein noted that the theory decides what we can observe (Heisenberg, 1972), and our current convictions do indeed form the basis for our future anticipations (Bateson, 1972; Kelly, 1955). Each construct or representation "actively creates and constrains new experience and thus determines what the individual will perceive as 'reality'" (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988, p. 200; see also Bateson, 1972; Efran et al., 1990).

The Challenge of Change

The subject of experience, the individual, is a nexus of interpretation coming into existence at the boundary of nature and culture. What we contribute to the structure of experience can change over time, as the cultures in which our sensory capacities develop and are educated change. These capacities seem to be transparent transmitters of information from the external world until juxtaposition with another version of the same state of affairs reveals their opacity—their role in the formation of experience. (Longrino, 1990, p. 221)

Change is endemic to being human. Most constructivists assume that the world exists along a dimension of time and that time brings changes. Changes call for continued reconstruction of events, and for that reason Kelly (1955) defined *psychopathology* in terms of a system of constructions that was impervious to change. Psychological health is characterized by an ongoing process of revision and fluctuation. "Each day's experience," argued Kelly (1955, p. 14), "calls for the consolidation of some aspects of our outlook, revision of some, and outright abandonment of others."

Within scientific circles, too, change is the rule. Constructivists challenge the conception of science as a series of systematic approximations to an objective reality, but they embrace a conception of science as consisting of dynamic and humanly constituted worldviews periodically punctuated and transformed by radical reconceptualizations (Kuhn, 1970). Even once-cherished and seemingly unassailable worldviews gradually accede to change and reconstruction.

Because each construction carries implications for future anticipation and action (see Kelly's [1955] fundamental postulate), it follows that shifts in those constructions necessarily enable new courses of action. "Each set of distinctions creates new action possibilities," noted Efran et al. (1990, pp. 35-36); "for example, in education the invention of such notions as adult education, community college, work study, cooperative education, and correspondence courses all generated options that were not previously available." Because our constructions simultaneously enable and disable particular courses of action, constructivist assessment is directed in part at assessing these processes of personal construction, and therapy is directed in part at dislodging the person from a trenchant adherence to the "reality" of current constructions.

"Unfortunately," noted Efran et al. (1990, p. 32), "we become so accustomed to the parts we have created that we act as if these divisions were intrinsic aspects of nature and that they predate our arrival on the scene. We reify our distinctions and become so attached to them that we can hardly imagine other ways of doing it." We forget, in short, that we are the authors of these constructions and attribute them instead to intrinsic properties of an extrinsic world, a process that Kelly (1955) is reported to have irreverently dubbed "hardening of the categories."

In summarizing constructivist assumptions, their restricted knowledge claims merit emphasis. The world is never fully knowable, and for that

reason the pursuit of ultimate meaning or ultimate truth is, for the constructivist, illusory. "As human beings," noted Polanyi (1958, p. 3), "we must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt to rigorously eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity." Objectivists, in contrast, believe that our constructions in some sense correspond ever more accurately to a real and external reality, gradually converging at the point of truth. Constructivists temper this optimism with the realization that all knowledge is contextualized and constrained by the organizational features of our biological, psychological, and cultural embeddedness (see Lyddon & Alford, Chapter 2, this volume). "What we think we know about the world is always determined by the exigencies of our own situation," noted Efran et al. (1990, p. 32), reminding us that "neither science nor any of our other human pursuits yields privileged access to the sort of information of which a diehard realist dreams."

Constructive Comparisons

So far, we have reviewed a few of the central tenets of constructivism and in so doing have set the stage for better understanding what distinguishes constructivist assessment. One way to further this goal along pragmatic lines is to build a bridge to constructivist assessment techniques by comparing and contrasting them with more traditional methods that target roughly the same domain of experience—namely, cognitive-behavioral techniques for the assessment of beliefs, thoughts, and "self-statements" (Kendall & Hollon, 1979; Merluzzi, Glass, & Genest, 1981; Segal & Shaw, 1988). Similar comparisons could be made in relation to other schools of thought (existential, psychodynamic). Readers interested in the relationship between constructivist therapies and existential therapies may be interested in Soffer's (1990) comparison of these approaches. Likewise Soldz (1988) traced constructivist developments within recent psychodynamic therapies and noted several points of contact between these two therapeutic traditions. Here we will limit our comparisons to cognitive-behavioral orientations because these are broadly familiar to practitioners across disciplines and frequently are viewed as most closely related to constructivist developments. This comparison of constructivist

TABLE 1.1 Features of Cognitive-Behavioral and Constructivist Approaches to Cognitive Assessment

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Cognitive-Behavioral Approach</i>	<i>Constructivist Approach</i>
Intended effect of assessment	neutral, non-"reactive"	change generating
Target	isolated thought unit, self-statements, beliefs	construct <i>systems</i> , personal narratives
Characteristic focus	frequency of thought, degree of belief	implicative relations between constructs
Temporal focus	present	present, but more developmental emphasis
Form of cognition studied	proposition, e.g., "I am worthless."	fundamental distinction or bipolar construct
Assumed relations between cognitions	associationist, (para) logical	hierarchical; emphasis on core ordering processes
Level of analysis	individualistic	individualistic to systemic
Diagnostic emphasis	disorder-specific	comprehensive, general
Mode of administration	self-administered questionnaire	interactive interview or program, personal "diary"
Format of instrument	highly structured and standardized	less structured, idiographic
Scoring	quantitative	both quantitative and qualitative
Criteria for adequacy	psychometric	both psychometric and hermeneutic

and cognitive-behavioral assessment techniques yields several clear bases of distinction. Twelve of these are depicted in Table 1.1.

Intended Effect of Assessment

In the ideal case, most cognitive-behavioral assessment strategies are designed to be neutral in their effect on the subject, and "reactivity" to the assessment procedure is regarded as a troublesome side effect to be strictly controlled; that is, in keeping with the "objectivist" tradition to which they subscribe (Neimeyer, R. & Feixas, 1990), most cognitive methodologists tacitly assume that their procedures merely reflect rather than change the thinking process of the subject. It follows that assessment

strategies that demonstrably influence the very processes they measure (e.g., as when a think-aloud protocol alters the form of a subject's thoughts) should be regarded with suspicion, leading to the conclusion that any "reactive" technique "may be limited in its utility" (Genest & Turk, 1981, p. 247).

Although this criticism may carry force in the context of traditional methods, it is less pertinent in the context of clinical assessment that is linked to treatment. Constructivists in particular reject the notion that our methods allow us wholly unobtrusive access to the activity of our subjects, and in this way they ally themselves with contemporary shifts in the physical sciences (Keutzer, 1984). Instead constructivists argue that any *assessment* should be seen as an *intervention* that prompts subjects to reconstrue the concerns being evaluated (cf. Neimeyer, R., 1988). When a therapist employs a circular question (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980), for example, he or she is assessing simultaneously the assumptions that family members bring to bear on a presenting problem and is staging an intervention. "What would happen in this family if this identified problem were to disappear?" for instance, might serve the therapist in two ways: It might reveal the multiple meanings attached to the presenting concern, while at the same time possibly suggesting alternative actions, promoting the rehearsal of new solutions, and challenging earlier notions concerning the intransigence of the problem. According to this framework, the development and articulation of personal constructions are themselves processes of construction and for that reason necessarily introduce some degree of change or development. Indeed recent research by Feixas, Moliner, Montes, Mari, and R. Neimeyer (1992) supports this view insofar as the serial administration of repertory grids prompted subjects to "tighten" or clarify the implicit predictions in their construct systems, resulting in more organized or coherent thinking about the domain of elements being considered. From this perspective, *assessment* is inherently a change-generating process that can be harnessed and directed toward promoting personal reconstruction, the ultimate goal of counseling and psychotherapy.

Target of Assessment

In keeping with popular models of psychological distress that view emotional disturbance as a consequence of dysfunctional or irrational thinking (e.g., Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979; Ellis, 1962), cognitive