

ARMAN BEGOYAN'S COGNITIVE- CONCEPTUAL THERAPY: AN OVERVIEW AND SOME TECHNIQUES

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1. Introduction

In this paper we will try to present briefly the basic concepts and theoretical principles of Arman Begoyan's Cognitive-Conceptual Therapy, namely: the conceptual system of personality, theory of learning, psychopathology and psychotherapy, the concept of psychotrauma, conceptual dissonance and smoothing strategies, conceptual psychoanalysis and also the main therapeutic techniques developed and practiced by the author.

Cognitive Conceptual Therapy (hence CCT) is an approach which has been worked out and practiced by Arman Begoyan at the beginning of his professional career and is the result of his clinical practice analysis. The approach is integrative and carries the imprints of various philosophical and psychological concepts. The works of Roman stoics Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, the ideas of Parmenides concerning perception of the reality, philosophical views of Protagoras on relativity and instability of things, the views of Greek Cyrenaica on the essence of cognition and perception, Sartre's concept of 'fundamental project', neorealism of Gaston Bachelard, the theory of three worlds by Carl Popper, empiriocriticism of Richard Avenarius and ideas of Giambattista Vico have had great impact on the development of the basis of this approach. Likewise invaluable has been the influence of phenomenological psychology and philosophical psychotherapy by William Sahak Sahakian, constructive alternativism and the concept of personal constructs by George Kelly, rational-emotional therapy by

Albert Ellis, the concept of 'world image' and 'personal meanings' by Alexei N. Leontev, theory of attitudes by Gordon Allport, theory of attitudes by Dimitri Uznadze, theory of social views by Serge Moscovici, theory of social attitudes by Shota Nadirashvili. Also one of the basic theoretical basis of conceptual psychotherapy is the theory of conceptual system of personality (Бегоян, 2010; 2011a).

2. Person's Conceptual System and gestalt-concepts

The basic postulate of Cognitive Conceptual Therapy is that the attitude of a person to the reality and all other realities of life are virtually conceptual. Everything is cognized/learnt and perceived not according to and through single constructs or beliefs, but is based on a general cognitive-existential conceptual system. It is the features of the system (i.e. conceptual system), not the single elements of the system (i.e. constructs, beliefs, dispositions) affect, the cognition and perception processes, interpretations, prognosis and planning (Бегоян, 2011; 2011a). This is why the author has chosen to name his therapeutic approach 'conceptual'.

Each person during his/her life develops a specific and unique world vision, world-view (Weltanschauung), which is called „Conceptual System” in Cognitive Linguistics, as well as in CCT. And via understanding this conceptual system and its characteristics mental health professionals could organize and realize the psychotherapeutic treatment process more competently and effectively. The conception of *Person's Conceptual System* is the general theoretic basis for Cognitive Conceptual Therapy (Бегоян, 2009).

Person's Conceptual System (hence PCS) is multi-level; it implies complete understanding, interpretation of inner and outer worlds, subject-subjective and subject-objective, certain emotional attitude towards interpretations and their evaluation (cognitive-affective reaction) as well as organization of life activities adequate to the mentioned interpretations (Бегоян, 2009). PCS includes the whole inner world of a person, their thought, cognitions, emotions, ideas and dreams. It represents every aspect of personal experience, including beliefs, dispositions, objects, mental states. In other words, PCS is one and the only indispensable reality for person. Gestalt-concept is some psychic construct which combines 'personal meaning/evaluation' (Leontev), 'social attitude' (Nadirashvili) and 'mental state'. This means that the concept, as a unit of the Person's Conceptual System, is a kind of specific content of the psyche that integrates these three components. And the center of the integration of these components and the link connecting them is the specific MEANING, which may turn to appear in the form of events, things, ideas, beliefs, roles, etc. Simply stating – the

concept is a bunch of cognitions, emotions and behaviors integrated by the specific MEANING (Бегоян, 2011a).

Thus, the importance of the research, the diagnostic and therapeutic roles of Person's Conceptual System becomes evident. In the process of diagnosis and evaluation of the client's problem, the psychotherapist should comprehend their inner semantics and logics and then "translate" it into scientific language for giving definite appraisal to mental phenomena. The study of Person's Conceptual System will help to understand the inner world of a person more precisely, and interpret his motives adequately. It will also make easy the evaluation of client's problem, diagnostics and discovery of his recourses in the process of psychotherapy.

3. Theory of learning, psychopathology and psychotherapy: formula of Cognitive Conceptual Therapy

One of the distinctive features of Cognitive Conceptual Therapy is the theoretical-methodological basis: the theory of learning, psychopathology and psychotherapy.

Conceptual theory of learning serves as a theoretical basis for conceptual psychopathology and psychotherapy.

Within the framework of CCT, the terms 'learning' and 'perception' are used by the author in the following meanings:

- when a certain situation **A** is perceived for the first time and when accordingly a person doesn't have any emotional experience connected with it, the author calls it a process of *learning*, the process of learning about a certain reality,
- when a certain situation **A** is perceived repeatedly and if accordingly a person has some emotional experience connected with it, the author calls it a process of *perception*, the process of perception of a certain reality.

Begoyan presents the conceptual theory of learning via a formula which is described below.



where:

- A** – (Activating situation)
- S** – (State) – emotional experience
- PCS** – (Person Conceptual System)
- M** – (Mark) – conceptual evaluation of S
- B** – (Beliefs) – belief about certain M
- NST** – (Nervous System Type) – type of nervous system
- C** – (Consequence) – reaction (behavioral act, emotion, conclusion).

In the process of learning about a certain **S**, a person emotionally experiences it (**A**), and according to **PCS** evaluates his/her emotional state. Certain emotional experience is **S**, **M** denotes cognition. After the process of learning, certain **S** is associated with certain **M**. And again in accordance with **PCS**, a person forms a particular moral-social norm about the **M** (belief, motive, principle, rule), and this is **B**. Then we have the reaction, the features of which are conditioned by **TNS**. Thus, we have **S**, **M** and **B** connected with associative-conceptual bond forming a certain gestalt-concept (Бегоян, 2010, 2011a).

According to Begoyan, the roots of psychological problems lie in the process of learning and perception. Particularly in the stages of conceptual evaluation of certain emotional experience/mental state (**M**), formation/choice of certain moral-social norms (**B**). Begoyan suggests that a person's reaction- a certain behavioral act, emotion, conclusion-always corresponds to the chosen moral-social norms. The problem occurs when, as a result of certain circumstances, the usual process of perception is disturbed or changed, thus causing frustration. Then the consciousness is involved to solve the problem (Бегоян, 2010). And this stressful situation will not be solved unless the conceptual dissonance between usual/expected gestalt-concept and new experience is overcome. More often to release the tension and to preserve the integrity of gestalt-concept, a person either denies the new experience (he/she becomes more rigid) or rejects the whole gathered experience and the reaction becomes destructive. And for changing this destructive reaction or regaining the ability to comprehend rationally the reality, it is necessary to make changes in the gestalt-concept. To achieve this goal, the object of psychotherapeutic interventions should be **S**, **M**, **B**. For this purpose, Begoyan has developed several methods and techniques which will be presented briefly in this paper (Бегоян, 2010).

4. The concept of psychotrauma

In his theory of Cognitive Conceptual Therapy, Begoyan has introduced his idea on psychotrauma. Since the causality and dynamics of disorder are decisive and goal-forming moments in the process of psychotherapy, the idea of psychotrauma is considered to be one of the central objects of study in Cognitive Conceptual Therapy. Thus, according to Begoyan, the psychology and Cognitive Conceptual Therapy of psychotrauma are based on eight basic ideas:

1. Human nature at any moment of existence, irrespective of age, level of socialization and education, is inclined to have certain expectations from people, environment and life in general.
2. These expectations in their turn in the course of time are merged into one prognostic system – some 'future scenario' – which, in its turn, becomes an integral part of the conceptual system of personality (**PCS**).

3. But since man's prognostic abilities are not perfect, it is natural that many expected things are not consciously realized in life or they come to life through opposite polarity. This is why any person can come up with the first act of discrepancy between the content of expectations (future scenario, **PCS**) and actual reality. This concerns conceptual dissonance which will be dwelled on later in this paper.
4. Conceptual dissonance is traumatic by its nature. It refers to the actual fact, and trauma is the conscious realization of that fact by a person. Conceptual dissonance may occur at the age of three, but the realization of it, the trauma, can appear later.
5. Conceptual dissonance, that is, the traumatic experience is the main *generator* of different mental, behavioral and somatic disorders.
6. In general, our life is full of conceptual dissonance experiences. As to the very first one, it strikes us already during the first year of life, in early childhood. That is why many problems are rooted in our childhood.
7. Trauma is some experience, which needs to be integrated. Unless it is integrated, it cannot be healed.
8. It is the integration of traumatic experience that becomes the objective of CCT (Бегоян, 2012b).

When a person realizes the fact of conceptual dissonance, which has happened a long time ago or recently, only then is it possible to speak about trauma. In other words, trauma is the conscious conceptual dissonance. And trauma is experienced by a person through emotional and mental pain, sufferings. And of course, these pains and sufferings have negative influence on any biological, organic and functional systems of humans, resulting in psychosomatic disorders, changes in the heart rate, body temperature, causing muscle tension, anxiety, hyperactivity and overtalkativeness.

And since the origins of mental and/or behavioral disorders are informative by their nature, and traumatic experience is information, it becomes necessary to work out that information, i.e. reintegrate the new experience (Бегоян, 2012b).

5. Conceptual dissonance: smoothing strategies

Conceptual dissonance is the conflict between actual and new experiences. It is the inadequacy/incompatibility of certain expectations/person's predictions ('Scenario of the Future') and certain reality. Conceptual dissonance is the disturbance/violation of a personality conceptual integrity. Conceptual dissonance occurs when new experience cannot be explained in terms of actual beliefs and predictions, expectations.

The state of conceptual dissonance is described as psychoneurotic tension (stress) and is characterized by fear and anxiety. And that is why conceptual dissonance activates psychological defense mechanisms for protecting and saving the integrity of Person's Conceptual System, the homeostatic state of a Person (Бегоян, 2011с, 2012а).

The term 'Pathogenic Strategies' refers to a conceptual coping with dissonance, in other words, it refers to conceptual dissonance smoothing. Each person feeling conceptual dissonance intends to escape from that mental state and initiates/adopts some unconscious strategies, i.e. some set of specific psychic mechanisms and processes to reach this goal (smoothing the conceptual dissonance). The mentioned set, which is used to integrate a new experience into the Conceptual System ('Person's Conceptual System'), and which is de facto smoothing the conceptual dissonance in that way, is referred to as 'Conceptual Dissonance Smoothing Strategies'. There are two types of strategies concerning ultimate results of their functionality: constructive (or normal) and destructive (or pathogenic) (see Бегоян, 2012а).

Normal strategies do not affect mental health negatively and do not cause any kind of mental or behavior diseases. Opposite to normal strategies, the pathogenic strategies have negative effects on psyche. Concerning the essence of the mentioned negative effects, I differentiate three types of pathogenic strategies for conceptual dissonance smoothing:

- any type of distortion of existing reality – „Leaving for other worlds”, „Constructing the desired/alternate reality”. This strategy is presented in the linguistic form such as: *„Alexander said that he loved me. I thought he was a wonderful person and that he would love me forever. Thus, it most likely seemed to me today that he said he was leaving me”*,
- any type of distortion of the laws and principles of formal logic. In this case, such a distortion appears in a linguistic form exemplified by: *„Alexander said that he loved me. I thought he was a wonderful person and would love me forever. So today when he told me that he was leaving me, he probably meant that he was tired of walking and wanted to go to sleep off”*,
- total rejection of the effectiveness of predictive abilities and anticipations and thus turning to polar values (linguistic form: *„Alexander told me that he loved me. I thought that he was a wonderful person and would love me forever. But as he told me today that he was leaving me. It means he has never loved me, I have been wrong in him, and he's a bastard”*).

Learning about linguistic manifestations and features of the above mentioned pathogenic strategies, the therapist can carry out effective assessment and identify the client's individual strategies for conceptual dissonance smoothing (Бегоян, 2012а).

6. Conceptual psychoanalysis, reintegration and reframing

In the context of Cognitive Conceptual Therapy, conceptual psychoanalysis serves both as the basic method and condition/framework for therapy (Бегоян, 2010, 2012b).

To overcome the conceptual dissonance and to achieve the set therapeutic goals, firstly it is necessary to analyze the actual gestalt-concept, understand the nature of each component and the relationship between them. To achieve this objective, we need to analyze not only the gestalt-concept, but also the Person's Conceptual System. And this is the process of conceptual psychoanalysis, the first stage of psychotherapy. At this stage of therapy, the therapist tries to imagine the problem from the point of view of the patient as precisely as it is possible, the way the patient perceives the problem, as well as s/he understands the real state of affairs and the nature of the problem, the genesis and etymology, and to imagine the complete picture of the reality and what should be reached as a result of psychotherapy.

The next step is the stage of certain interventions, which are aimed at overcoming conceptual dissonance caused by new experience; this is the stage of conceptual reintegration and/or conceptual reframing.

By conceptual reintegration Begoyan means some strategic approach and a set of certain psychotherapeutic techniques which will help in changing **B**. And by conceptual reframing the author again means some strategic approach, which consists of certain psychotherapeutic techniques aimed at changing **S** and/or **M** for developing such **B**, which would provide constructive/desired **C** (Бегоян, 2011a).

Sometimes in the course of psychotherapy, these two interventions substitute one another alternatively, or they are used simultaneously. It mainly depends on the client's cognitive and emotional characteristics (Бегоян, 2012b).

7. Therapeutic techniques

From the cognitive point of view, we definitely live in the future and with the future. That is why in the process of psychotherapy our expectations, desires and future scenarios are of utmost importance. Even if the therapist explores the past of the client, it is for the purpose of identifying the features of their future scenario at a certain period of their lives and following their further fate: the development, changes, transformations and results, the outcomes of those transformations, and helping the client to accept the unwanted future, which has already launched and has managed to turn into the past (Бегоян, 2012a).

We will describe three main authoring techniques used in CCT aimed at smoothing conceptual dissonance.

7.1. Cognitive imaginative modeling: constructing the alternative values¹

The reactions of Person are determined by conceptual evaluation of a stimulus, to be more precise, by emotional experience provoked by stimulus (this approach is postulated in CCT). Before reacting in a certain way in accordance with its evaluation, during the process of perception/feeling, Person gives one and only one cognitive evaluation to the perceived information/material. In some cases, these kinds of evaluations are not always adequate to reality and they (i.e. evaluations) can include irrational elements. This is the 'Principle of Priority' in psychology. Rian E. McMullin (МакМаллин, 2001) argued that the 'Principle of Priority' is too important in psychology. The principle says that people pay more attention to first rather than further impressions of the events. These first impressions can be referred to as everything: first flight on a plane, first kiss, etc.

Begoyan finds it necessary to teach a Person to think alternatively, i.e. to help a Person to develop (for the same emotional experience) skills/ability of alternative evaluation, which itself will shape/develop a rational view and perception of the surrounding things/objects. The development of alternative thinking will influence the Person's perceptions of certain emotional experience and will entail certain changes in the Person's reactions to a certain stimulus (a word, an event, a thing).

Most people admit that during the evaluation of one or another experience (mostly during evaluation of other's motives of behavior) they understand that there is a probability of a mistake. But the awareness of this probability does not free them from the *Tyranny of the primary/automatic evaluation*. Even if at a particular moment that kind of idea/assumption is helpful, in the course of time the primary evaluation is fixed and becomes stronger. The latter occurs thus:

- firstly, the initial evaluation is real – it has its own cognitive form and „is dressed” in certain emotions, i.e. it is (the initial evaluation) associatively-conceptually linked to a certain emotional experience. Moreover, there are no alternative valuations – they simply do not exist. There is only the assumption of their existence,
- secondly, even if the alternative valuations do exist, they exist only in fleeting and non-stable cognitive form. Thus in the course of time, as a result of the functioning of the nervous system, cognitive content is prone to move to the deeper levels of the psyche (so long as the consciousness cannot keep unlimited volume of information in its phenomenological space), and the emotional part/side of the sense remains as the background. And later on, when the same event reoccurs (or in the case of similar event), the cognitive structure which was associated with a somewhat emotional con-

¹ Бегоян, 2012с.

tent is activated, since in this situation the emotional experience always appears/acts as a key/trigger.

That is why it is necessary to construct alternative evaluations (based on the principle of construction of initial evaluations) to solve this problem, i.e. it is necessary to construct a new cognitive form of evaluation and link it with relevant emotional experience. And for the realization of the objective, i.e. for constructing alternative evaluations, Begoyan has developed this therapeutic technique, the main goals of which are the following:

- 1) to teach the client to advance/create/form alternative evaluations,
- 2) to make these alternatives maximally real.

Suggestion of alternative evaluations of the situations or others' behaviour motives is not that difficult, but it is more difficult to make them real and competitive, and it is possible only by associating cognitions with emotions. The latter means that it is necessary to make more alternative cognitive emotive images/states associated with certain situations.

7.2. Cognitive-imaginative modeling: positive modeling of upcoming events²

Each of us does his/her modeling of upcoming events automatically. We are all constructing what may happen tomorrow, the day after tomorrow or on certain day in the future. It could be a job appointment or an exam or a declaration of love. But sometimes in a certain time interval, we are constructing negative models of the upcoming events (i.e. we are autoprogramming a negative scenario). It means that sometimes we automatically construct negative expectations about the upcoming events. There exist many factors that could explain this phenomenon but the main aim of this review is the description of the therapeutic technique which can be helpful in coping with that kind of mental state.

The technique of positive modeling of upcoming events' is the constructing of a positive *model of certain time interval in the future*. The Technique *per se* is a cognitive imaginative suggestion³, a programming which does influence human consciousness and subconsciousness in the same manner like automatically constructed models of upcoming events.

As a result of detailed modeling of upcoming events, it is possible that some new gestalt-concepts will develop in the Conceptual System of Personality, which (i.e. gestalt-concepts) will serve as subconscious behavioral instructions for a person in a certain time interval. This means that by creating a certain model of upcoming events (and a gestalt-concept as a base) some intentional

² Бегоян, 2013.

³ In terms of psychotherapy.

mechanisms are launched, which tend to realize/implement the Model⁴ (i.e. the created/constructed model of upcoming events). More clearly, a man influencing the course of events subconsciously, tends to (again subconsciously) reach a kind of dénouement/outcome which he had considered probable, i.e. as a prognosis, as a constructed model of upcoming events.

Description of the technique. After the Client has shared his or her apprehensions concerning a certain upcoming event, the therapist helps them to construct/imagine the upcoming event in detail: starting from the place where the upcoming event will take place, ending with dialogs and behavioral acts. The therapist continues the process of modeling till the crucial moment comes: the situations which were constructed automatically by client in a negative form.

After the therapist has heard about the client's desired dénouement/outcome (of the upcoming event), the therapist should ask the client to imagine everything the way he wants (positively) and verbalize the new model. In the same manner, the therapist should give the necessary „form” to the new and positive model via leading questions. The main principle is to concentrate the client's attention not on a „more probable” version of the upcoming event's outcome, but on the „more desirable” one.

From time to time, the therapist should check how the client feels, in order to fix the conceptual associative relations/links/associations between certain cognitions and emotions.

7.3. Modeling and constructing alternative scenarios: “the director” – a technique used in the case of future scenario breakdown⁵

As we have stated above, every person has certain expectations and desires and in the course of time they all make up one conceptual model – a pattern of future, ‘future scenario’ (FS) which is constructed by a person according to his/her prognostic ideas. Quite often, most of these prognostic ideas are mistaken. Some time later, the wanted pattern of future constructed by us becomes a part of our conceptual system, a part of us, as if it (wanted future) has already started, and later on, if our expectations are not met and a sort of breakdown of scenario happens, it is perceived as a real trauma and loss.

In the case of ‘scenario breakdown’, the psychotherapist should analyze and make out the case himself within the framework of this technique and then introduce it to the client. In the process of therapy, the event, the chain of events or any time period is imagined as a film scenario. The client stands for the director,

⁴ It occurs by one of the characteristics of Concepts – the desire to complete.

⁵ Бегоян, 2011b.

and the therapist is the producer. The dialogue is led by the therapist and, if necessary, he gets the expected answers by leading questions.

This technique helps the client to construct alternative scenarios in case their 'future scenario' has undergone certain breakdown as a result of Conceptual Dissonance.

8. Conclusions

CCT is one of the contemporary integrative approaches which takes its roots from philosophy and integrates relevant traditional and modern therapeutic techniques, as well as clinical data. This background makes CCT flexible for covering various behavioral and emotional issues and ensures sound treatment results. It can also serve as an integrative approach for other therapeutic schools, particularly that of cognitive, i.e. CCT, can be considered as a theoretical axis which can integrate various psychotherapeutic methods.

One of the basic concepts of Cognitive Conceptual Therapy is that a person's attitude to the existing reality is conceptual by its nature. Arman Begoyan's Cognitive Conceptual Therapy provides suchlike conceptual approach for the understanding and solution of various psychological problems.

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