

PCP: A PERSONAL STORY

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We were asked to tell the story of what personal construct psychology has done for each of us and what we have done for it. It is difficult if not impossible for me to separate out what personal construct psychology has done for me and what I have done for it. It seems that my whole life changed when I came across the name 'George Kelly'.

THE BACKGROUND

Kelly appeared in what was, for me, a psychological desert. It was full of methods - behavioural, statistical and mechanical. I left Occupational Therapy in 1959 to take a degree in psychology at University College London as a mature student. In itself, a wonderful experience. I really enjoyed the sex life of the 3-spined stickle-back, the dancing bees and all those lonely rats running their mazes – although I was not so keen on the rats. But, apart from ten hours of lectures in the whole three years from a psychoanalyst, there was little on you and me.

I then did my clinical training at the Maudsley Hospital, Institute of Psychiatry, the emporium of Hans Eysenck. Here were individuals, but they were treated as objects. Off I would go with an agoraphobic lady to help her climb her graded hierarchy of 'trips outdoors'. We would talk about all sorts of things – to help her relax and feel confident to take the next step up the hierarchy. But my report only talked about how well or not she had done in increasing her exploration of the big wide world. Nothing was ever said about what we talked about. I thought it really strange.

I then went on to do three years as an Assistant Lecturer at the Institute. During that time I was registered for my PhD. It was, naturally, mechanical. It was on the effects of speaking in time to a metronome on the speech of those who stutter. All good behavioural stuff. But sabotage was afoot. I came across the repertory grid. At the Institute of Psychia-

try at that time, anyone who had a new 'tool' or 'method' immediately became an expert in that tool or method. So I quickly learned a bit about a *rankings grid*. To the surprise of my supervisor I decided to ask my PhD sample of stutterers to complete a grid. It was the first method I had come across that combined qualitative and quantitative data. Some have said that Osgood's semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1961) did that, but, to me, it is a nomothetic method of measurement (Fransella, 1964) and so fundamentally different from the grid I had been introduced to. Here at last I was asking people a bit about how they saw things. But I have to say that those years at the Institute were very important to me. In retrospect, they showed me what it was I did *not* want to do.

The grid seemed an intriguing tool and I got an early chance to test its usefulness monitoring the psychological change process. A psychiatrist, Bernard Adams, was treating a patient who had been transferred from prison to the Institute for treatment of depression. His crime was committing acts of arson. Dr Adams thought arsonists got sexual pleasure from setting fire to buildings. So we decided to test that idea (Fransella & Adams, 1966). I designed 6 different rankings grids that this man completed over a period of time. The results showed that at first he was puzzled by the idea of getting sexual pleasure from lighting fires (one of the constructs). But he went on to construe this idea and decided that he was definitely *not* that sort of person. That was shown by an increasingly negative correlation between the constructs *take pleasure in being sexually aroused* and *like I'd like to be in character* (-0.93), *like me* (-0.77) and *the feelings I get when just having put a match to a fire* (-0.96). It turned out that, in his view, he was punishing wrongdoers – wicked people. It was one of the first papers describing the use of the grid and it apparently appealed to George Kelly.

Apart from that research showing me, in 1965,

just how sensitive the grid can be for monitoring change, I developed a lasting interest in the relation between construing of the self and behaviour. One of the findings was a continual negative relationship between the construct *like me* and *likely to commit arson* ending up with a correlation of -0.90 . So often it is shown that people disown a form of behaviour that they know they possess, such as being an alcoholic (Hoy, 1973).

As many other people know, once you have played with grids you want to learn something about where they come from. The dreaded two volumes of Kelly – all there was at that time. I was then hooked for life.

SOME OF THE ATTRACTIONS OF PCP

I don't remember precisely what it was that hooked me. It was partly its philosophy – saying *none of us is trapped by what has happened to us in the past, although we might trap ourselves if we construe it that way*. But I think it was the general idea that *here was a psychology that focused on the person – on that lady travelling up her hierarchy of situations*. Now I could find out what it was all meaning to her rather than treating her like an automaton. Then there was that most original of ideas – not made clear in the 2 volumes – *that all behaviour is an experiment*. But more excitement was still to come.

In 1964 Neil Warren organised the first PCP conference in England at which George Kelly gave his important paper on 'The strategy of psychological research' (Kelly, 1969). It was at that conference that I had my first meeting with him. Having seen a copy of my Presbyterian arsonist paper, he made a joke about being a fellow Presbyterian. That fell quite flat since I had no idea what on earth he was talking about! He said later than he then feared the evening we were all to spend with him over a meal would be tough going. It was no such thing.

The year after I completed my PhD – in spite of my having used a repertory grid - I started a 3-year piece of research funded by the Mental Health Research Fund to apply PCP to those who stutter. I was enormously attracted by the theory but had been educated to question everything. I wanted evidence that there was some connection between the theory and the world of behaviour. That could ideally be tested with those who stutter. My hypothesis was

simple. As the speech of those who stutter diminished so their construing of being a fluent speaker would increase. I had been lucky enough to be introduced to Denny Hinkle's 1965 thesis - the year I completed my PhD. He had told his supervisor, George Kelly, that he was not clear exactly what a personal construct was. So his thesis was about the meaning of a personal construct being found in what a construct implies and what is implied by it. As a measure he devised the implications grid as well as a wealth of other things of interest – including ladder-riding and the resistance to change grid

But, for me, Denny offered even more. He reworded many of the corollaries. One caught my fancy - the Choice Corollary. He says:

"A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for increasing the total number of implications of his system. That is to say, a person always chooses in that direction which he anticipates will increase the total meaning and significance of his life. Stated in the defensive form a person chooses so as to avoid the anxiety of chaos and the despair of absolute certainty."

The Choice Corollary is the major motivation construct in Kelly's system. And what a powerful one! We all have a say in what sort of person we are and that surely also means we have the power to change things we do not like about ourselves. Although changing ourselves is not always that easy.

Another of those things I continue to find so useful about personal construct theory is the idea that all personal constructs are bi-polar. Thus, so often I do not change something I do not like about myself because somewhere in that hierarchy of constructs is one that says "you would not want to be that sort of person." As Kelly says, always try to find out what a person is *not* doing by doing what they are doing. It was for this reason that I modified Hinkle's implications grid so that I could examine the meaning of both poles of all personal constructs.

But just to finish this story about my personal construct theory of stuttering. I argued that people stutter because they have done so in some form or other since childhood. Their ways of communicating with others is by using disfluent speech. They, at

some level of awareness, in Kelly's theory *choose* to speak in this way – it is the only meaningful way they have of speaking. If that were so, then I did not have to work with their disfluent speech at all, I needed to help each person construe, make meaningful, a fluent way of speaking. I did this to the best of my ability and I am glad to say a number of the people became significantly more fluent *and*, importantly, at the same time the meaningfulness of being a fluent speaker increased significantly (Fransella, 1972).

Thus, I came to the conclusion that not only does personal construct theory give one ideas of new ways to approach people's problems but it also appears to link construing and behaviour in a meaningful way and is something that one can use for research purposes.

So, to sum up. For me, at least as important as its philosophy, its changing behaviour from being a response to something to being the experiment, the whole notion of bipolarity and the emphasis on taking some responsibility for the sort of person we are because we *choose* to be like this, is the fact that, as Peggy Dalton and Gavin Dunnett (Dalton & Dunnett, 200?) so elegantly put it in the title of their book, it is a *psychology for living*.

WORKING WITH AND FOR PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

In the 1960's Don Bannister in particular was very active in travelling around the country talking to many university students' *Psych Socs*. There was no doubt that university students were intrigued by this new theory and its tool, the repertory grid. I joined him in this exercise. We soon decided that there was a need for a book on PCT other than the 2 volumes and so was born the Penguin Book *Inquiring Man* (Bannister & Fransella, 1971). In 1971 there was no problem in using the term 'man' but by the time of the 3rd edition in 1985 it was a problem. However, the publisher decided that the title of a book could not be changed after 14 years and so the *Inquiring Man* it remained. There has been no 4th edition because of the early death of Don.

I'm not sure when it started, but early on in the 1960's the Kelly Club was formed. Apart from me, others who attended were Don Bannister, Miller Mair, Neil Warren, Han Bonarius and Phillida

Salmon. We met in London periodically. The Club fell apart because we could not agree about why we were meeting. I should add here that I have seen many other PCP groups failing over the years and have concluded that those who think personal construct psychology is so important are individualists and not clubbable.

During the 1970's, I was teaching medical students at London University's Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine. We had a standard University syllabus which meant it had little room for PCP. But while there I started introductory courses in PCP for anyone who might be interested, including anyone from outside the University. I wanted then and have continued to want to this day to interest people in PCP who were not psychologists – probably a throwback to my first training as an Occupational Therapist. Several people at this conference came on those early courses. Some of these people wanted more and so the advanced PCP courses were created. These dealt with Don's comment that we kept putting on the overtures but where was the opera.

In 1975 Al Landfield achieved the seemingly impossible. He persuaded the University of Nebraska to base its Symposium on Motivation on personal construct psychology. Impossible because that is a highly prestigious event in psychology and one that was usually quite behavioural in emphasis. In any case, I had to go to that. It all went very well and it was on the way back to London that I realised it was rather like an international personal construct psychology congress. So, I first persuaded Don Bannister and then a reluctant Miller Mair to join with me to put on the first official International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology at Christ Church College, Oxford University. Those congresses have continued every other year since then. The most recent one was in Columbus, Ohio to celebrate 50 years since the publication of Kelly's magnum opus, and in 2007 it is in Australia.

Then, in 1977, Don and I got so fed-up doing courses to teach people how to do grids we decided to write a 'manual'. A second edition of that I worked on with Richard Bell and published in 2004 (Fransella, Bell & Bannister). I would like to emphasise here that Kelly saw the repertory grid as an integral part of his personal construct theory. That is clear from his published and unpublished work. He was, after all, trained as a physicist and mathematician. Al Landfield has reported someone as saying

that he thought personal construct theory was a good theory of physics (Landfield, personal communication). Grids have been over-used but, on the other hand, they should not be dismissed out of hand as 'not Kellyian'.

THE CENTRE FOR PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

In the late 1970's I found I was being torn between doing what I loved, being involved with PCP, and doing what I was being paid to do, teaching psychology to medical students. I made the difficult choice, with the agreement of my husband, and took the gamble of early retirement and founded the Centre for PCP in 1981. My aim was, once again, 'to give PCP to whoever wanted it'. Several people here were involved in the work of the Centre. Some are here or would have been if they could: Peggy Dalton, Helen Jones, Chris Thorman, and John Porter. Others here were involved in its development including Sean Brophy and David Winter.

Very early on we got involved in doing what I called PCP diagnostic research in large organisations. The head of training at British Airways had read *Inquiring Man* in Australia in 1971 and liked it but could not see how to use it – a common complaint. He made contact with me at the Centre and asked if we could retrain 35,000 people! Needless to say I said we could not. "What can you do?" he asked. "We could tell you what your people think about their work and BA". Our eventual proposal was accepted and it was then I had to work out how to apply PCP and grids to large numbers. It actually turned out to be quite easy. First of all we carried out individual interviews with a sample of those the organisation were interested in – in this case cabin crew. During these interviews we elicited personal constructs from things important to them, such as 'my boss', 'BA as an organisation', 'how I see my job now', 'how I would like my job to be' and so forth. We then sorted out the themes in their personal constructs and put constructs representing these themes into a grid format. That standard grid was then administered to a much larger sample of cabin crew.

Some people say that using standard grids is not 'proper' PCP. But the Commonality Corollary tells us that the extent to which we share a given culture

so we will share many of the ways of construing that culture. Since we always try to ensure that we have a homogeneous sample of people in an organisation, such a cabin crew, we may assume that much of that culture is shared.

A major stumbling block was the analysis of the BA data. Peter Fonagy, who is now Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis, was very informed about statistics and computer programming and said he would write a program to analyse the grids. That is still in use today. Amongst other things, that programme makes it possible to assess the degree to which people are using the constructs in similar ways and, like a well-brought up psychologist, only results that are significantly different from zero are reported.

Apart from a wide range of work in organisations, the Centre continued running courses on PCP at general and advanced level as well as offering a PCP therapy and counselling service. Helen Jones was instrumental in getting the Centre involved with the 'Rugby Conference', which developed into the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. UKCP decided to group its organisation members into Sections. A major problem arose. No one wanted PCP in their Section. It is a long story, but eventually we got a home along with NeuroLinguistic Programming and we were jointly called the Experiential Constructivist Section. This was very important because any person trained by an organisation belonging to UKCP can call themselves a psychotherapist. So we were training PCP counsellors and psychotherapists. The training of PCP therapists and counsellors is now provided by the organisation PCP Association.

In the 1990's, Nick Reed and I started the Centre's distance learning programme. That has been particularly popular with students from across the world. Last year we had the first Americans, one an Occupational Therapist and the other the Programme Director of Art Therapy.

One major thing I am very pleased about is that the Centre was responsible for getting Kelly's two volumes re-published by Routledge after it had been out of print for some years. The psychology editor said he "would like to be the person who published Kelly". The downside was that I had to find people who would type the whole two volumes on to computer. A major task but it was done and the two volumes were published in 1991. I am sad that so much

of the published work on PCP still cites the 1955 version with those page numbers. That means that anyone who only has the Routledge 1991 version cannot directly look up those citations.

In the meantime, David Winter has been very active in the PCP world and his clinical courses have always included personal construct psychology. He was instrumental in the Centre becoming part of the School of Psychology at the University here under the directorship of Nick Reed. We are very grateful to Professor Ben Fletcher for welcoming the Centre into his School. The University also houses the Fransella PCP Collection which includes books, audio and video tapes, correspondence, and George Kelly's published and unpublished manuscripts. In addition to all this, the University made me a Professor of Personal Construct Psychology – a title I chose.

All in all, I believe the Centre has played a significant part in the development of PCP and, I hope, will continue to do so in its new abode at this University.

As for me as the years have gone on, I have written more books – all PCP - and I continue teaching on the distance learning programme and give the occasional talk here and there.

SO, WHERE IS PCP NOW?

Where are the people interested in PCP 'out there' spreading the word? There do not seem to be many. For instance, there was the Quinquennial Annual Conference in Glasgow in 2001. I could see little sign of many PCP papers being given in the provisional programme. So I got together enough people to offer a PCP symposium. It turned out to be of greater interest than the organisers predicted. The small room was packed out with people covering the floor space. Out of that symposium arose the edited *International Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology* (Fransella, 2003) and then the *Essential Practitioner's Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology* (Fransella, 2004).

I really do believe there is a lot of interest 'out there' but the problem has always been how to tap into that interest. People often wonder why it is that PCP is not more popular or even better known. I would say that the BPS Quinquennial example is a good one. If you want PCP to be better known and

used, you have to advertise it by giving talks at conferences and generally working to spread the word. It does not happen by osmosis. It is very encouraging to see so many new faces here at this one-day conference. Perhaps there should be more things like this.

Apart from the issue of advertising, I think there is another reason for the lack of new people using PCP in their work. It could be that when Kelly's work appeared in 1955, and perhaps through to the 1970's, there were really only behaviourist and psychodynamic approaches in psychology. Now many ideas in Kelly's philosophy and theory are not new. Qualitative as well as quantitative methods of measurement now abound. PCP is not now seen as a revolutionary theory. It is not so spell-binding at first glance. But it does still have some very revolutionary ways of looking at things. Personal choice and behaviour being an experiment are two such.

Perhaps the ideas are spreading but not to psychologists. For instance, a few days ago on BBC's Radio 4 programme a psychiatrist said that a certain idea was a *psychological construct*.

But there is yet another issue that needs to be addressed. There is an increasing separation between the interests of those in the United States and in this country. The difference is over *constructivism*. Why is it the mainly academic psychologists in America who increasingly espouse constructivism while those in this country, largely non-academics, stick to personal construct theory? I have said that, in my view, the increasing popularity of 'constructivism' is, or may well, overshadow personal construct psychology. Jon Raskin's response to that in the last chapter of his edited second volume of his *Studies in Meaning* (2004) is that I am wrong. He thinks we, over here, are feeling threatened and made anxious by the change in focus in America and that there is no threat to personal construct psychology itself. But Trevor Butt (2004), in his review of Raskin's book, has come up with a different explanation. He points to a cultural difference. He says "Perhaps it is not coincidental that PCP first took firm root in the UK and that most advocates of constructivism now come from North America". American psychology is steeped in the ideas of Mead and has a more social than personal view.

I have also expressed the view that one needs a theory rather than a philosophy if one wants to work professionally with other people. Raskin took me to

task about this also. Trevor says “Raskin reports Fransella as saying that constructivism is too philosophical. My reservations about it are quite the opposite; I don’t think of it as a philosophy at all; instead I think it lacks the coherent philosophical underpinning that PCP has”. Whatever the pros and cons of the opinions, Raskin’s chapter sub-head says, *The constructivists are coming!* Whether this *philosophy* will take attention away from personal construct *psychology* is an unknown. But, in my view, it is certainly an issue that is not going away.

SO, WHERE IS PCP GOING?

I believe that there are many people ‘out there’ who have come across PCP, liked the ideas, but do not know quite how to use it. It is not as simple a theory as it looks at first. But many of us here have found it worth the struggle to get hold of it. So, I do think it will continue to grow in use, certainly in this country. There are many developments, such as the narrative approach, that are ideal to be used as tools within the theoretical environment of PCT.

For me, I would love to explore the implications of Kelly’s alternative Fundamental Postulate which says:

“It is the nature of life to be channelized by the ways events are anticipated.” (Kelly, 1980)

Kelly clearly had ambitions for this as he goes on to say:

“This is a more venturesome postulate than the one from which the psychology of personal constructs was launched. But from it may spring some additional ideas about the whole of psychology.”

How different is that alternative Fundamental Postulate from James Lovelock’s *Gaia* (2000)? He looks at the earth as a self-regulating system. Self-regulating? How about changing Kelly’s alternative Fundamental Postulate to:

It is the nature of the Earth to be channelized by the ways events are anticipated?

We now have evidence from cell biologists at Edinburgh University that plants construe – that is, they work things out and act accordingly, of course not using brains but touch and smell at least (Trevavas, personal communication, 2002).

It is the nature of plants to be channelized by the ways events are anticipated.

I suppose all this adds up to my seeing PCP as enormous fun. It led me to try to understand physics to see how that might have influenced Kelly’s thinking (Fransella, 1983). Then it led me to look at mathematics, part of Kelly’s physics degree (Fransella, 1999). It was new to me that ‘constructive mathematics’ has been around for many years. Personal construct psychology keeps stretching me to study new things and think in new ways. It is something that is difficult to give up. Now I have a new garden to tend and I can’t help saying to myself “dear bush, what is making you look so sad?” Perhaps they will come and cart me away soon.

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