

UNDERSTANDING, EXPLANATION, AND PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS

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Personal construct psychology can be read either as an attempt to understand people by appreciating how the world appears to them, or to explain their behaviour in terms of personal constructs that inhabit some interior Cartesian realm. In this article, I maintain that this understanding versus explanation distinction (Dilthey, 1988) is useful and helps us clarify the personal construct project. By examining the phenomenological strengths of personal construct methods, we can approach an understanding of the person that appreciates the complexity of the lived world.

Key Words: *personal constructs; phenomenology; understanding versus explanation*

UNDERSTANDING VERSUS EXPLANATION

It was Dilthey (1988) who first proposed a strong distinction between causal explanation and understanding. In the natural sciences, causal explanations of natural phenomena are sought, ideally through the use of experiments where independent variables are manipulated and dependent variables subsequently measured. But Dilthey (1988) argued that the social sciences should not model themselves on the natural sciences. In the complex lived world that we inhabit, we cannot always expect to find causal connections. Understanding human action is more like interpreting a text than explaining the movement of particles. In the interpretation of a text, we move back and forth between an examination of a word or the sentence in which it is embedded. The sentence is made up of words whose ambiguity is dispelled by their context. Similarly, we understand sentences only when we read them in the broader contexts in which they themselves are embedded. Only then can we pick out say, a metaphoric or ironical sense intended. We move to and fro between part and whole to grasp the meaning in what has been termed a hermeneutic circle (Ihde, 1986). So, for example, we might read the word 'groom' as applied to children and realise that it is not being used either as a noun (one who looks after horses) in its literal sense as a verb (to comb or care for an animal, usually a

horse). It is only in the context of the current societal anxiety about paedophilic strangers that we apprehend its metaphoric meaning, along with the menacing connotations. In the same way then, we make sense of human action by reading it in the context in which it occurs. So when I say 'I understand why you did that', I do not mean that we have access to your private thoughts and feelings. Instead, I mean that it makes some sense to me, given what I can see of the situation in which you appeared to be placed. A more refined understanding is achieved if and when I can appreciate exactly how things did appear to you: your construction of events.

Now one might argue, following Rorty (1982), that explanation is itself a type of understanding, and that the understanding versus explanation dichotomy is too crude to capture the scientific venture. But for the personal construct theorist, any construct should be evaluated in terms of its utility. And I maintain that it is a useful construct. In the area of personality, there is an ever increasing tendency towards a reductionism that looks for causal explanation in either brain science or an interior Cartesian realm (Butt, 2004). The rejection of causal explanation highlights the value of a science of personality that promotes an understanding based on the constructing of the other's processes of construction. Clearly, the psychology of personal constructs (Kelly, 1955) is one approach to personality that is firmly grounded in this type of understanding.

In this sense it is a phenomenological approach; one that is primarily interested in the way in which the world appears to people (Kelly, 1955, p. 42). Both phenomenology and the pragmatic tradition in which Kelly worked are firmly monist and not dualist (Merleau-Ponty, 1944/1962; Dewey, 1910/1993). Both are committed to understanding phenomena at the level at which they appear, avoiding both reductionism and recourse to a mind made up of different substance to the body. But although contemporary theorists see strong links between Kelly's pragmatism and phenomenology (Warren 1998; Butt, 2003, 2004), Kelly himself maintained a distance between his work and phenomenology (Kelly, 1969a). Reading *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, it is easy to think of personal constructs as personal cognitions, the property of a ghost in the machine (Ryle, 1949) that exist behind and indeed power behaviour. In this article, I will argue that an understanding of people is best achieved by avoiding this sort of explanation. I will begin by examining personal construct theory's links with phenomenology.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Kelly (1969a) famously declared that PCT could not be subsumed under any other theoretical approach. In his 1955 work, he underlined the similarities between PCT and what he termed 'neophenomenology'. But elsewhere, (Kelly, 1969b) he misunderstood phenomenology, mistaking it for a type of introspectionism. Holland (1977) points out that it was a very partial, selective reading of European phenomenologists that was taken up by American theorists Rogers and Maslow. It is likely that this was the only exposure to phenomenology that Kelly had. Phenomenology was a methodology devised by Husserl in the early twentieth century, to overcome the same Cartesian dualisms that were targeted by pragmatism, the tradition in which Kelly wrote. For phenomenologists, the dualisms person/world and self/other are dialectical dualities where focus on either pole misses the vitality of the relationship between them. Husserl developed Brentano's concept of *intentionality* that refers to a correlation between the person and the world, or construct and event. There is no consciousness without the world, and there is no 'lived-world' with-

out the person. Phenomenologists reject the idea that there is a real world (of events) behind the world of appearances (or construction) that we represent to ourselves in perception. Instead, all we have is the lived world' – a psychology of personal constructs.

'Intention' emphasises that we are always conscious *of* something. We cannot experience desire unless it is desire for something, fear unless it is of something, thought unless it is about something. We are intimately connected or correlated with the world. Husserl's vocabulary of *noema* and *noesis* (world and the way it is experienced) translates approximately into Kelly's 'events' and 'constructs'. There is a real world of events beyond our comprehension, one that would exist if humankind had never graced the surface of the earth. But all we can know is the lived world, our construction of it. Phenomenological reflection is not to be equated with introspection, a subjective mentalistic exercise that examines internal mental representations of a real external world (Ihde, 1986). Instead, this reflection, or phenomenological reduction, attempts to get beyond our natural ways of seeing, our taken-for-granted assumptions, in a return "to the things themselves!" (Husserl; cited in Ihde, 1986, p. 29). So the reduction, far from being an examination of the contents of the mind, is an exhortation to stand back, and put aside our habitual constructions in a fresh look at the world of events. A close and fresh look at events always reveals more than is apparent from our 'natural attitude' - that collection of folk wisdoms and assumptions that make up the social reality that pre-dates each of us as individuals. Events will bear many more constructions than are grasped immediately. This clearly parallels Kelly's philosophical position (derived from Dewey, 1993) of constructive alternativism.

However, although Husserl addressed both the subject/object and the self/other, dualism, he was less exercised by that of mind/body. He was considered by those who followed him – Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty - to have privileged reason with his proposal of a *transcendental ego*, an 'I' that in some way extracted itself from the intentional correlation of event/construct. For Husserl it was as though the intellect preceded the social and physical world. It is this ego that reflects on experience, or construction, and makes further sense of it (Ihde, 1986). The existential

phenomenologists demoted this *transcendental ego*, emphasising our essential *being in the world* (Heidegger, 1927), or the inevitable perspectival status of our constructions, resulting from our embodied nature (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). For these existentialists, the reflections of the ego are the last development in the event-construction-construer structure. Event and construction are inextricably inter-twined; this intentional correlation denies a separation of knower and known. For Kvale (1992), Merleau-Ponty's insistence on our perspectival construing foreshadows the development of post-modern thought. We are fundamentally pre-reflective beings, who often report feeling most alive when lost in a task. Ihde (1986: 47) paraphrases Merleau-Ponty – "I am outside myself in the world of my project". It becomes apparent that this mirrors Mead's view that humankind is primarily impulsive and only conscious and reflective through interaction. In Kelly's vocabulary, we construe in action, we do not possess constructs.

For the existential phenomenologists, existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1958). This means that the person as a reflective consciousness is the last development in the intentional correlation. We are unable to adopt a privileged intellectual high ground, as our projects are primarily existential and interpersonal, rather than intellectual. Dewey's and Kelly's view of the person as self-inventing is clearly similar to Sartre's, although Kelly's ambiguity about core structure (Butt, Burr & Epting, 1997) might be seen as placing him between transcendental and existential phenomenology. Perhaps following Dewey (See Mounce, 1997), he seems reluctant to give up the idea of a unitary core self, while at the same time acknowledging its invented, constructed status. Existentialists see personal integrity as an achievement, rather than a given. The concept 'existence' emphasises our inter-subjectivity, the commonality of our construing.

The world of events will not bear just any construction; the world exhibits a resistance to our perception of it (Merleau Ponty, 1944/1962). We certainly cannot *decide* to see it in any way that we want, as the Gestalt figures demonstrate in visual perception; our purposes and our embodied nature limit what we can make of things. Our projects in the world are primarily practical (existential) and not intellectual. Our constructions are both personal and social, but also limited to what

is 'afforded' (Gibson, 1979) by the world of events. Nevertheless, Ihde (1986) convincingly demonstrates that there are many more ways to see the Necker cube than the two inversions mentioned in the orthodox psychology of perception. The educated eye, much like the educated palate of the wine-connoisseur, is able to detect many non-normative perceptions. Using hermeneutic techniques implied by the phenomenological reduction, the viewer is able to stand back from 'sedimented' constructions. In this way, the world is both found and made, discovered and invented.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) distinguished between what he termed 'objective thought' and the 'lived world' (See Hammond, Howarth & Keat, 1991). Objective thought pervades the natural attitude of naïve realism. It maintains a clear separation of subject and object, and proposes that the world consists of separate objects whose dimensions and properties can ultimately be known and measured. Because these objects exist independently of each other, 'external relations', that is, causal relations exist between them. So the pressure, volume and temperature of a gas can be thought of as 'external' to each other, and Boyle's law tells us how to estimate one property accurately if we have knowledge of the other two. But unfortunately, the lived world is messier than this; everything in the lived world is ambiguous, open to interpretation. Psychological entities like thought, emotion and behaviour are not separate from each other. Historically, psychologists have separated the person into these different faculties, but our experience tells us that how we think, feel and act is intimately related. Therefore, 'internal relations' apply, where one feature of the lived world cannot be specified without implying the others. When I wave enthusiastically at a friend, it is not because of a feeling of warmth and friendliness, and my feelings are not caused by a cognitive construction of friend/enemy along which the person is placed. Friendliness *is* the whole configuration.

Objective thought has proved useful in the natural sciences, where it made possible the type of causal explanation so often sought after in the psychology of personality. If we conceive of constructs as personal cognitions that are responsible for the way we act, we bring objective thought to bear. If, on the other hand, we see constructs as embedded in action itself (Butt, 1998), they lose their power of causal explanation. One way of

understanding the two readings is to see them as occupying the two poles of the lived world/objective thought construct.

PCT AND OBJECTIVE THOUGHT

I have argued that the person in existential phenomenology is certainly not that straw man imagined by Kelly (1969b), living in a world of dreams and unconnected to reality. But neither is it the person of naïve realism, who is in contact with the real world via their senses and represents this reality in an internal cognitive space. However, Kelly famously championed the ‘person as scientist’, a person primarily in the business of prediction and control. PCT can be read as both a somewhat positivistic cognitive theory, as well as a phenomenological approach. Kelly paid tribute to Dewey, recognising that in many respects the psychology of personal constructs reflects Dewey’s pragmatism. Like Dewey, he disliked Cartesian dualism (1955, 872). But elsewhere (1955, p. 17) he was less committed to monism. In this enigmatic passage he sounds as though he has swallowed a philosophical dictionary:

Ontologically, our position is identifiable as a form of *monism*, although in view of the many complex varieties of ontology, the differentiation of its monistic form from its pluralistic aspects is hardly worth the effort. If it is a monism, it is a *substantival* monism that we are talking about; yet it is *neutral*, and, like Spinoza, we are prepared to apply *attributive pluralism* to the substance whenever our purposes might be served thereby. (1955, p. 17. Italics in the original),

Perhaps the uncharacteristically pompous tone adopted here merely indicates that Kelly knew that he was straying out of his philosophical depth, and felt the need to shore up what he was saying with some big words and names. But what was he saying? It is not at all clear, but we can perhaps get some indication from the direction he takes in the next section of his chapter on constructive alternativism. Here, he says that: “Whether a theory is called ‘psychological’, ‘physiological’ or ‘sociological’ probably depends upon its original focus of convenience” (p. 18). As he had argued in his Fundamental Postulate, there are not events (for example, like emotions) that belong exclusively in these different realms, only events that can be construed physiologically,

psychologically or sociologically. Presumably then, this is ‘attributive pluralism’; another phrase for constructive alternativism. But perhaps also, Kelly wanted to leave the door open for explanation in dualist terms. The vocabulary of ‘construct systems’, ‘loosening and tightening’ and ‘constriction and dilation’ does, after all, conjure up images of cognitive structures with causal connections to surface behaviour.

So PCT is open to a reading that implicitly rests on the natural attitude of dualism, and moreover, on the causal explanations that inhabit the objective thought of the natural sciences. This assumes the existence of a construct system within the person which is the cause of behaviour. PCT’s methodology can be seen as providing a sort of psychic X-ray, in which an individual’s system of internal constructs is revealed and can then be the focus of therapeutic attention. When the construct system is modified, behaviour will right itself in its wake. The natural attitude of today leads us to incorporate a dualism that sees minds inside bodies and constructs behind behaviour. When practitioners and academics read PCT, they are likely to interpret it within this framework, and much of the published work in the field demonstrates this. Science is, after all, the most valued enterprise as we enter the new millennium, and both status and material resources flow towards its practitioners. The public wants psychologists to be able to tell them why people think, feel and act as they do, what motivates serial killers, psychopaths and fascist dictators. People want to know exactly how traumas impact on them, and what the causal relationship is between childhood experience and adult life. The prizes are awarded for being able to successfully profile offenders, predict behaviour and explain neurotic misery. There are few for understanding the life worlds of others, aiming to interpret their actions.

Merleau-Ponty (1941/1983) saw Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis as the most promising psychologies of his day. Both pick out detailed and important aspects of the lifeworld and both can be read phenomenologically. Yet both fell under the spell of objective thought, looking for brain states that explain perception, or childhood experiences that cause adult neurosis. The English translation of Freud translated the German *it (Es)*, *I (Ich)* and *over-I (Über-Ich)* as *id*, *ego* and *superego*. The Latin terms transform

ways of experiencing the self into structures and entities within the person. Freud's phenomenological insights were striking, but he wanted to be recognised as a scientist. Merleau-Ponty's project was to rescue the insights of these theories; to interpret them in terms of the lived world rather than objective thought.

And Kelly also wrote in two voices. He celebrated scientific endeavour in psychology, indeed recommended the person as scientist as a metaphor that empowered the person. This can locate PCT in the camp of the natural sciences where causal explanations are sought within the individual for his or her behaviour. 'Constructs' are seen as entities that inhabit the individual rather than construing as a process that goes on primarily between them. Yet Kelly also saw the person as defying description and categorisation, was sceptical about laws in psychology, and doubted the value of sequential explanation. Even in his Fundamental Postulate, he refused to talk of cognition, affect and behaviour, preferring to consider 'a person's processes' in an implicit acknowledgement of the internal relations that obtain here. It is this latter voice that constitutes a phenomenological interpretation (or, as Chiari & Nuzzo [1996] term it a 'hermeneutic' constructivism). Just as Merleau-Ponty's thought may be drawn on to achieve a different reading of Gestalt Psychology and Psychoanalysis, so it can help us see PCT as a methodology for understanding the lived world.

PCT AND THE LIVED WORLD

The lived world is ambiguous

In his 1955 work, Kelly maintained a separation of events in the real world, and our individual constructions of them. This can be seen as a Kantian position, distinguishing between *noumena* and *phenomena*. Nevertheless, it is the alternative constructions that the personal construct psychologist has to work with. In his later work, Kelly (1969c) further emphasised this, claiming that he was 'no longer a realist' in the sense that the psychotherapist has to work not with what has happened to clients, but how they interpret it; "There is nothing so obvious that its appearance is not altered when it is seen in a different light" (Kelly, 1969c, p.225). His advocat-

ing of the credulous approach precisely mirrors Husserl's phenomenological attitude in contrast to the natural attitude. The phenomenological attitude is one of openness to new possibilities and constructions. Ihde (1986) outlines the method, or phenomenological reduction, that facilitates this attitude:

1. Bracketing - the analyst attempts to bracket off their preconceptions in understanding phenomena.
2. Phenomenological description - phenomena are described, but causal explanation is avoided.
3. Horizontalization - No assumptions about relative importance of phenomena are made.

We can clearly see Kelly's (1955) 'credulous approach' in these rules. Clients' descriptions of their experience will be couched in terms of their construct systems; the relationships between their dimensions of meaning. The therapist must bracket off any impulse to rush to explanation based on his or her system. Careful listening is required. The credulous approach is the phenomenological attitude. Kelly insisted that the credulous approach does not imply that the therapist should be captured by the client's construction. Instead, he or she should be able to subsume it, recognising it as one valid formulation. In phenomenological terms, it is this merging of horizons that enables intersubjectivity to emerge. In everyday life, our engagement with the world is primarily pre-reflective; out in front of what we can say about it, but nonetheless intentional. In psychotherapy, the therapist helps clients reflect on their intentionality in a hope that this produces increased agency and power of choice.

PCT offers us a range of extraordinarily powerful techniques for helping people to spell out their intentionality. Other broadly phenomenological approaches rely exclusively on lengthy interviews for this purpose (See Moustakas, 1994). The problem is always how the interviewer manages to bracket off his or her interpretations from those of the interviewee. Generally this is achieved through two strategies: a recognition of this danger is itself seen as a safeguard, and interpretations are always shared with the interviewee, allowing for his or her meanings to predominate. Kellyans have always recognised the importance of reflexivity, but more importantly, their techniques guarantee fewer projections on the part of the therapist/interviewer. So in ladder-

ing, it is clients who traces paths through their construct systems, and in the computer analysis of grids, construct and element constellations that emerge may be as much a surprise to either party. In his extraordinarily detailed suggestions for analysis of self-characterizations, Kelly (1955) lists many strategies for operationalizing the credulous approach. PCT techniques therefore offer truly innovative ways of extending the phenomenological attitude.

In the lived world, internal relations apply

In his fundamental postulate, Kelly refused to talk of thought, feeling and action, but instead insists on referring to a ‘person’s processes’. Construing is not just a cognitive affair, but is internally related to feeling and action. There is no causal relationship between separate human faculties. We should think of construing as occurring in action, and not behind it. People do not always deliberate on what they are doing. Nevertheless, their action is intentional; as the choice corollary suggests, what is important is what they might have done, but did not (1969c). In his ‘personal construct analysis’ of the Eden myth, Kelly discusses it in terms of three choices that are entailed. These are companionship-loneliness, innocence-knowledge, and good-evil. There is an emphasis of constructs as relating to action. There is a shift in the emphasis on the meaning of the ‘personal construct’, stressing choice:

“... a construct is at heart a black and white affair, rather than a scale of grays. Indeed, it is precisely because constructs do comprise pairs of sharply drawn contradistinctions that they enable man to make his choices, and get on with the human enterprise”. (Kelly, 1969b. p10)

The model of humankind is ‘the person in motion’, being carried along in the stream of life, making choices as they present themselves pre-reflectively. Constructs then, are not to be thought of as personal cognitions in any way causing behaviour, but are the configuration of thought, feeling and action, intentionally directed through our projects in the world.

Kelly, like Merleau-Ponty, recognised that internal relationships existed not only within the person, so to speak, but between the person and the world. In his last writing (Kelly, 1969b), he

rejected what he called ‘sequential explanation’, external causal relationships between events and construing. Behaviour is “man’s independent variable” (p. 36). This may be seen as overstating individual agency, but is surely at least an empowering heuristic for a clinician whose task is to help individuals to reconstrue their lives (which is, after all, the focus of convenience of PCT). But certainly Kelly was moving towards what phenomenologists advocate: describing, contextualizing and understanding action rather than explaining it: “*Explanation, in a humanistic or psychological sense seems to me to be a matter of seeing where something fits into a sequence.*” (p. 44).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the beginning of the new century, we frequently hear that the public has lost its faith in science, because it has failed to deliver on its promises. One reason for any loss of faith in psychology as a science might be the over-extension of objective thought into the lived world. Psychologists have wanted to predict and control to an unrealistic extent. Objective thought leads us to separate person from world and mind from body, then to look for external relationships between them. Interestingly, Dewey cautioned against this nearly a century ago:

“The question of integration of the mind/body in action is the most practical of all questions we can ask of our civilisation. Until this integration is effected in the only place where it can be carried out, in action itself we shall continue to live in a society in which a soulless and heartless materialism is compensated for by a soulful but futile idealism and spiritualism.” (Dewey, 1910/1993, p. 304)

We can now see an even more irrational split between this materialism and idealism. While biological psychologists seem to posit a genetic explanation for just about anything, in everyday life people also draw on mysticism to understand themselves, albeit in a causal manner. It is not uncommon to find intelligent individuals identifying themselves by their star sign, or explaining behaviour in terms of energy or karma.

Dewey’s pragmatism resonates with phenomenology in its call to focus on action. This

focus leads us to recognise that we cannot separate out thought, feeling and behaviour, any more than we can see a clear boundary between the personal and the social world. When personal construct psychologists accept the ambiguity of the lived world, they can contribute significantly to the understanding of it, while at the same time foregoing the inevitably disappointing project of trying to explain it mechanistically.

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(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp04/butt04.pdf>)
Received: 31 Dec 2003 - Accepted: 12 Jan 2004 - Published: 31 Jan 2004