

## THE PREFERENCE AXIS - AMBIGUITY AND COMPLEXITY IN PERSONAL CONSTRUING

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*This paper offers a simple method for clarifying personal meaning where there is ambiguity and dilemma, particularly at superordinate levels of construing. I outline a potential method which converts a bipolar construct into a matrix for exploration when there is no clearly preferred pole. Some of the theoretical and practical implications are discussed, and I suggest the addition of this method to the possible techniques for laddering constructs. The method is applicable in both clinical and organisational settings, particularly in situations where no immediate action or decision is required.*

Key words: *preference, dilemma, ambiguity, choice, core constructs, laddering.*

*"...the construct tends to force either one or other of the two alternatives. If it were not so, the construct would have no meaning." (Kelly, 1955)*

*"Construing is therefore not successful or even appropriate in the face of some kinds of experience" (Burr, 2003)*

In this paper, I propose a simple method which might be added to the PCP technique of laddering to explore the personal meanings of a dichotomous construct. Laddering has been described as "no more and no less than asking the question why?" (Dalton & Fransella, 1990). Descriptions of the technique however usually do require something more, as the person is asked to select the preferred pole of their construct at each stage of the process.

As described by Kelly, the two poles of our constructs are mutually exclusive: "an object cannot be both black and white.. If it were not so, the construct would have no meaning". In much of our literature and teaching, movement between poles of an existing dichotomous construct, or the inability to choose a preferred pole, are described as negative at worst or superficial at best. Lack of preference might be described as 'over-loose construing' or 'implicative dilemma', regular movement between the poles of a construct as 'superficial movement' or 'slot-rattling'. We do,

at least theoretically, see constructs as wholes, but at the same time we seem to put a lot of pressure on choice and the preference for one pole or the other, and we seem to value the relative stability of behaviours reflecting that preference.

In her paper on construing ambiguity, Vivien Burr (2003) has written about limits of dichotomous construing, suggesting that the notion of the bipolar construct seems to make most sense when we apply it to the need to make a decision and take action, or when we view the world as a source of information. Focussing on art and poetry, Burr argues convincingly that the 'solid can be fluid, the inanimate can be animated, the permanent can be temporary'. While Kelly's assertion that a thing cannot be both black and white may be a very practical notion for everyday purposes, it seems limited in relation to the complexity of art, and perhaps also to other aspects of experience.

During a recently observed training session on the technique for laddering constructs, participants were asked in the usual way to identify the preferred poles of their constructs before articulating their personal significance. The session put great emphasis on identifying preference, and I was left wondering whether our superordinate constructs might lend themselves to exploration through a more artistic sensibility which valued ambiguity and indecision as well as choice. While discovering preferences is an important step in

avoiding therapist assumptions about clients' meanings, the experience I observed seemed to highlight the way in which continually discriminating and evaluating the poles 'as opposed to' each other might prevent us from appreciating the construct as a whole, and truly understanding its meaning for the individual.

The participant I observed was struggling with a choice between 'being open' as opposed to 'being closed'. Their facilitator, failing twice to elicit a preference, had reached the stage of 'but if you had to choose...' Rather than sharing the facilitator's determination, I found myself identifying strongly with the construer's dilemma. How would I choose myself between these two interesting opposites? It seemed to me that it might be more fruitful to consider them in relation to each other rather than as opposed to each other. If I were really pushed to make a choice I would perhaps opt for being open, in its meanings of honesty and receptivity, but I would certainly feel a pang of regret at consigning being closed to the category of 'least preferred', valuing as I do the hidden inner world. The experience left me wondering why we are so insistent on choice, especially at superordinate level. Why are we so determined to categorise these values of the heart? It suddenly felt very un-Kellyan.

In my work with organisations and groups I am often trying to unhook what seem to be false opposites which have resulted in conflict. For example, a group may be arguing about efficiency as opposed to flexibility. Those who argue for efficiency are instantly construed by their colleagues as moving unhelpfully away from a flexible approach, while those promoting flexible work patterns are construed automatically by others as less efficient. The contrasts have become embedded positions but have very little internal logic. A simple and helpful intervention can be to disrupt the well-rehearsed argument by separating the two constructs. We can then explore 'being efficient or not' in relation to 'being flexible or not'. The two axes form a matrix which allows for more subtle discriminations, as well as creating an area of common ground – the acceptance that some behaviours or methods can be both flexible and efficient, and that some are neither. Converting a bipolar argument into a matrix of exploration can be a most facilitative

intervention, instantly changing the terms of engagement.

It may be that a similar method could enable the exploration of significant personal constructs. Our experience of our core values for example, may, like the world of art, be too ambiguous and complex to be pushed into the selection of a preferred pole. An implicative dilemma may be representative of a wholistic sensibility, rather than a problem in construing, particularly in a context where no specific action or immediate decision is required. The training session I observed was not the first time that I have found myself or others unwilling or unable to choose between the poles of our constructs. During the laddering process, one or two steps removed from the construct originally elicited, the specific context we started with no longer seems appropriate as a guide to choice – we are saying something much bigger here, and more is at stake.

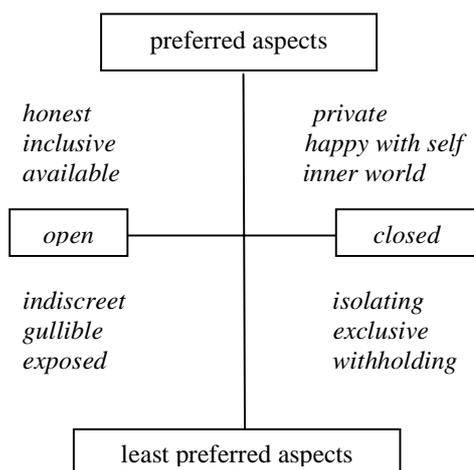
As a consequence of this experience, I have been experimenting with the introduction of a 'preference axis' as an alternative method for exploring the personal meanings of constructs. The addition of a dimension of 'most preferred/least preferred' allows the conversion of a dichotomous core construct into a matrix which might enable a more complex understanding of how the poles relate to each other, and how the construct actually works in the person's system. The French thinker Gaston Bachelard often described himself as a 'philosopher of adjectives', and introducing a matrix of preference to help us to elicit rich pictures of clients' constructs may lead to our becoming philosophers of adjectives rather than categorisers of choice. We may find more scope for honouring the wholism and integrity of a construct rather than encouraging people into dichotomous choices which fit our theoretical assumptions, but may not fit their reality.

As an initial experiment, I added a preference axis to my construct of *being open vs being closed*, which revealed my meanings as (Fig. 1):

I immediately felt that this had given me an important understanding of how this construct works for me. I am left unsure of whether I have a preference between *open* and *closed* even when I try to contextualise the construct, and I am not convinced that this matters. What I have become aware of is that I notice *open vs closed* – it's a

very important construct for me. The openness and closedness of people, and the rhythms of openness and closedness in myself and others, are things I pay great attention to.

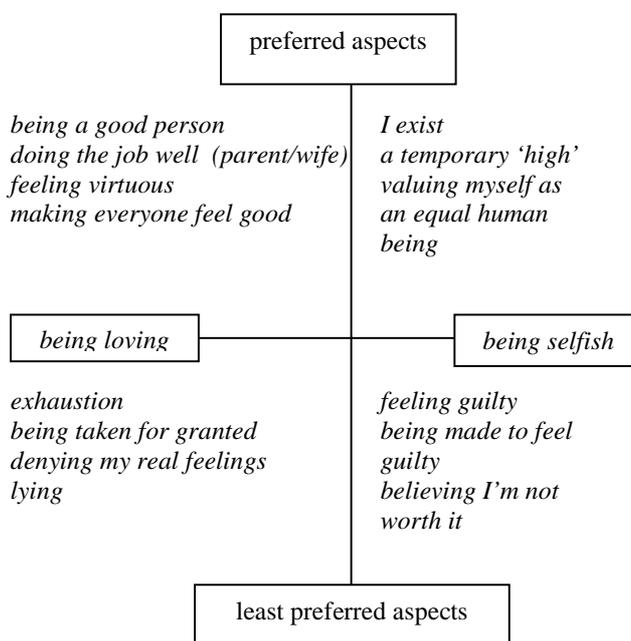
Fig. 1



The ABC model proposed by Tschudi (1977) recognised the potential for paradox in bipolar construing, proposing simple and helpful questions about the potential disadvantages of our preferences and the advantages of our least preferred options. This process often reveals a form of ‘payoff’ which makes new sense of our dilemma or stuckness, and can be a step towards change. The method outlined here perhaps elaborates Tschudi’s work a little, and may be particularly useful in situations where no choice or action is immediately required. Rather than moving towards resolution, the method encourages a sustained propositionality, a stance at the heart of personal construct theory, described by Kelly as ‘uncontaminated construction’ and contrasted positively with preemption, rigidity, and ‘ceasing to be a scientist’.

I have continued to experiment with the preference axis and have found it helpful in establishing a value-free approach to a person’s constructs. An example comes from a client who, exploring the many demands being made on her, spoke about *being loving* contrasted with *being selfish*. The use of a preference matrix implicitly established the potential value of both poles. She described her preferences as (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2



It is always difficult to imagine the path not taken, but I had the sense that the preference matrix revealed a range of very honest responses very quickly, without a positive or negative evaluation attaching exclusively to either pole. How easy, or possible, would it have been to ‘prefer’ being selfish over being loving? Might an immediate declaration of preference have rendered us less able to consider the pleasures of selfishness, or the frustrations of being loving? It seemed to prevent a slide into simple or obvious choices which would fragment the construct and potentially undermine its meaning, and it began, rather than resolved, a process of exploration.

In using the axis rather than asking for preferred poles, I am trading an emphasis on instant but potentially superficial clarity for an acceptance of wholism, ambiguity and confusion, with a greater honouring of ‘it depends...’. These and subsequent experiments suggest that preferences within many of our core constructs may be more fluidly held than our theory leads us to suspect. We inhabit the dimensions of our significant constructs, and, far from simple ‘slot-rattling’, we weave a web of positions and pathways within the coordinates offered by the preference matrix.

Going back to Bachelard to add the reference to this paper, I am both surprised, and at the same

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time not at all surprised, to find that the book falls open at this question:

*“Shall we repeat with the logicians that a door must be open or closed?”*

*And shall we find in this maxim an instrument that is really effective for analysing human passions?”*

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