

ON FURTHER REFLECTION

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This article discusses some challenges I face in applying constructive alternativism reflexively as a practical approach to daily life, particularly challenges that arise in relation to the construction of “self.” Obstacles that may prevent embracing alternatives include the tendency to slip into accumulative fragmentalism and the belief that we cannot entertain an alternative interpretation until we have disproved a current one. Overcoming these obstacles might benefit from Zen meditation techniques designed to enhance awareness of thoughts and bodily sensations, and the use of invitational forms of English, which help us assume responsibility for our interpretations.

Key words: *Constructive alternativism, self, Zen meditation, awareness*

Intrigued by the radical, practical, and reflexive spirit of Personal Construct Psychology as a psychology that we can apply to ourselves, I explore in this article some of the issues that I face in applying the philosophy of constructive alternativism, Kelly’s proposition that “*We assume that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement* (1955, p. 15, emphasis in original)” to my daily life. I find myself perhaps taking personal relevance and reflexivity in a direction that approaches to a more personal confessional and less of a more conventional academic article, but this does not mean, of course, that I will not refer to intelligent things that others have said, cite previous literature, and use formal vocabulary and phrasing. It does mean that the further I take my explorations of the personal application of constructive alternativism to my personal life, and the more honest that process asks that I become with myself, even if I respond only in a tentative and halting fashion, the more my narrative ends up taking a personal and confessional tone.

Reflecting on the issues I want to discuss led me to consider some realizations about what got me interested in psychology and personal construct psychology in the first place. Over time I have said, with tongue only slightly in cheek, that I chose to study clinical psychology not because I had a noble desire to help others but because I wanted to see what I could do to straighten out all of those screwy people who kept getting in my way and annoying me. I really wanted to make life more convenient and pleasant for me, and if that ended up making it better

for others well so much the better. I guess this might be what Freud meant by sublimation.

When I first encountered Personal Construct Psychology, I found myself immediately intrigued and captivated by the notion that I didn’t have to regard the current, time-honored, interpretations, explanations, and beliefs that I had heard all of my life as the final answer. The notion that we can revise and replace our ideas, and consider alternatives, seemed very liberating to me. But curiously, when more recently I looked closely at my attraction to constructive alternativism I realized that I did not only like its liberating benefits. Like my original motivation for psychology it also suited my personal comfort and convenience. When I didn’t have to take the beliefs that I had been taught all my life as final truths I felt greater confidence in my own beliefs, which often deviated from the conventional. So far this sounds quite liberal-minded and noble. But I have come to realize that I have not necessarily applied this awareness, this acceptance, to my own beliefs and ideas. To the contrary, I have come to see my tendency to use constructive alternativism as a justification for holding more strongly to my beliefs, as an alternative to the beliefs of others, rather than opening myself to the possibility that I could and should actively consider the benefit of revising or replacing my ideas themselves.

I have been writing about these issues for some time now: how we need to hold our ideas tentatively, not make institutions or idols out of them, speak in ways that require that we take personal responsibility for our beliefs, and use techniques to gain greater awareness of our personally constructed interpretations (McWilliams, 1988a;

1988b; 1993; 1996; 2000; 2003, in press). To treat myself fairly, I have also confessed along the way that I continue to experience great challenges in actually putting these concepts into practice. Within the context of both components of this trend, I humbly share with you some aspects of the current status of this personal project.

I would like to focus somewhat more specifically on some of the obstacles or challenges that I face in applying constructive alternativism, and constructivist and constructionist perspectives in general, as an approach to daily living and some of the practices that I have undertaken to address these challenges. I begin by facing the fact that although I like to portray myself as someone who believes that humans invent or construct knowledge, rather than seeing knowledge as an inherent truth that corresponds directly to events independently of human ideas, and that we should hold our beliefs and interpretations tentatively and revise them willingly, in actuality I greatly enjoy affirming the correctness of my own ideas and beliefs. I like to “be right.” I don’t want to experience the threat that would follow possible comprehensive revision of my core beliefs. I don’t want to acknowledge the anger that arises when events don’t go the way I believe that they should, or the unkind criticisms that I bestow on those who believe or act different from how I think they should. I don’t want to acknowledge the laziness and sloppiness that often lead me to hold on to and defend my beliefs rather than go to the trouble of seeing things in a new way, particularly someone else’s way.

SELF AND CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVISM

I have come to see a good deal of the problem as related to the picture that I have of myself, the stories that I tell to myself and others, and the relationship of that self portrayal to the account I give of my view of events. I increasingly believe that our sense of self plays a major role in our ability to revise and replace our understanding (McWilliams, 2000; under editorial review). Kelly wrote about core constructs and core role structure, the way that we create a sense of “self” that will enable us to maintain our survival and our interactions with others. Further helping me

to articulate these issues more clearly, the social constructionists emphasize the narrative accounts that we make of our selves, learned through social discourse with others, and how we use them to explain, justify, and account for our behavior. It strikes me that the accounts that we make to explain and justify our actions, the emphasis that society places on these accounts, and our identification with them, may contribute to the challenge that we face in revising interpretations of events. To the extent that I rely on my self account for my survival and my social relationships, I will feel reluctant to revise it and reluctant to entertain alternative interpretations of events. Particularly, to the extent that my self-narrative includes a description of myself as intelligent and possessing “correct” knowledge and information, I may tend to hold on to my beliefs when I might better consider alternatives.

Shotter’s (1993) social constructionist perspective emphasizes how these narrative accounts arise and evolve through conversation and social interaction. Gergen (1994) provides some assistance with this difficulty by emphasizing that we may create multiple accounts, and thus multiple “selves” that we use in different settings. Once we have created these socially-related narratives, however, it seems to me that we also incorporate them into our private view of the world and our self and that we learn to strengthen, reinforce, and reaffirm them in our private dialogues. I can easily see that the narrative accounts that I present publicly to others can differ from my private accounts. For example, Goffman’s (1959) famous study of the presentation of self, using a dramaturgical metaphor, eloquently described social interaction as a performance constructed to serve a “front-stage” purpose, but which differs from a perhaps more private or sincere “backstage” understanding. Additionally, I can see how the multiple “selves” of our private accounts might vary according to our sense of safety and security in the world and our ability to survive effectively and relate to others. For example, Angyal’s (1965) theory of universal ambiguity suggests that each of us operates from the viewpoint of two competing but fully organized narrative structures that assume a figure-ground relationship to each other, one representing a “healthy” perspective and another a “neurotic” account, with both bearing on how we must function to gain mastery over the environment and connection with others. These

examples demonstrate how our investment in our created narrative structure of self may tend to commit us to certain ways of interpreting events that may also interfere with our ability to consider alternative interpretations.

THE SPECTER OF ACCUMULATIVE FRAGMENTALISM

How do we deal with our tendency to hold on to our current beliefs, to view them as “truth,” even if we “know better?” Perhaps we can begin by recognizing the existence of this tendency as an inherent aspect of construing. Kelly (1979) elaborated on his philosophy of constructive alternativism, describing several intriguing concepts, and consideration of them might serve as guides to strengthening that awareness. I would particularly like to emphasize accumulative fragmentalism and its companion, the belief that we must disprove an existing interpretation before we can entertain an alternative.

Kelly defined construing as an inherently dualistic or bi-polar activity, suggesting that we cannot fully understand a construct dimension without articulating both of its poles. A complete understanding of constructive alternativism thus requires understanding its contrast pole, “accumulative fragmentalism,” a perhaps more familiar and conventional, but non-constructivist view that our understanding of the world consists of fragments of final truth, that someday we will have accumulated all of the pieces, like in a jigsaw puzzle, at which point we will understand everything (Kelly, 1979). We can find great comfort in this perspective because it means that we will never have to discard or replace anything that we already believe that we know. Even though I identify with constructive alternativism, the basic dualism of human existence tends to find me seeking comfort in accumulative fragmentalism from time to time, in spite of my best efforts.

As a side effect of the tendency toward accumulative fragmentalism, if an idea seems to work well we tend to think of it as true and we thus believe that we have to disprove it as false before we can entertain an alternative perspective. Kelly wrote that people “waste a lot of time trying to disprove what others have claimed in order to make room for their own alternative ex-

planations” (1979, p. 159). An example of what happens when we believe that interpretations can reflect truth or reality occurs when scientists believe that if one theory accounts for certain observations more effectively than another we must therefore regard it as true and it must displace the other theory. As Gergen (1994) suggested, when scientists view a more “accurate” theory as correct and any alternatives as incorrect the process of science operates as a zero sum game in which the utility of one theory automatically requires discarding all others.

We might consider this problem as similar to the issue that got Galileo in hot water with the Catholic Church so many years ago. The conventional view of the church authorities’ displeasure with Copernicus’ and Galileo’s heliocentric view of the solar system suggests that they didn’t like the way it casts Earth, and hence humanity, away from the center of everything. Barfield (1988) and Rowland (2001) propose an alternative construction. In their view, the church officials objected not so much to the content of Galileo’s cosmology but to the underlying epistemology. As Barfield (1988) put it, “It was not simply a new theory of the nature of the celestial movements that was feared but a new theory of the nature of theory; namely, that, if a hypothesis saves all of the appearances it is identical with truth” (pp. 50-51). Rowland articulated the objection to the “arrogance” of the notion that a theory that accounts for the appearances must therefore present a final and objective answer. “It is simply not correct to assert, as Galileo did, that there is a single and unique explanation to natural phenomena, which may be understood through observation and reasons, and which makes all other explanations wrong” (Rowland, 2001, p. 137).

Instead, we can view even an empirically supported theory as one example of a human-invented attempt to account for events that must remain open to further consideration. If we switch back to the other pole and embrace constructive alternativism, we can join the social constructionists in feeling free to consider a multiplicity of ways to construe the world without abandoning or rejecting the comfortable ways that we currently look at things. Since events hold no loyalty to how we speak of them or how we interpret them, we can entertain new propositions just to see what happens. We don’t have to worry about whether our beliefs or our accounts of our observations reflect

a reality that exists independently of our experience.

How does our constructivist position view the relationship between our beliefs and reality? We might not find it necessary to fully understand or agree with Kelly's assumptions about "reality" in order to entertain his ideas about how we use our constructs, but such a discussion might make the process more complete. Kelly (1955, 1979) believed in the existence of the universe and the gradual human understanding of it. He also, however, proposed that even though human beliefs might eventually correspond to reality such an event would not occur until an infinitely far off point in the future. Thus, we can protect ourselves from the arrogance of thinking that our current local views represent the final answer, just as we can avoid the similarly arrogant perspective of those who believe that the world will end tomorrow, as though we, of all the people who have lived on the planet, have been chosen to see how it all comes out.

Other constructivists and constructionists naturally represent a variety of views on this topic of the relationship between our beliefs and reality, and the more clever ones have managed to avoid the entire issue by postulating either that an independent reality does not exist or that even if it does we can never know it directly (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2003). Regardless of which position we might choose to identify with on this topic, I suggest that we can proceed with our experimental consideration of these issues even if we don't necessarily agree on this ultimate philosophical issue. All that we need to do for the time being is agree to entertain the propositions that all of our ideas and knowledge stem not from "revelation" by events themselves but from human invention, that no one so far has a complete, final, truthful "God's-eye" account of events, and that we can freely entertain a variety of ways of looking at events without having to deal with the question of their rightness, completeness, or finality (we may, however, want to give some thought to whether we see them as useful or fruitful).

APPLIED CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVISM

Assuming that we agree to consider this possibility, or at least that we are willing to go along

with the proposal just to see what happens, we then face the question of what methods or techniques we might use to help us apply it to our daily lives. For many years I have found that Buddhist meditation practices, particularly those of the Ordinary Mind School of Zen (Beck, 1994; Bayda, 2002), have a great deal to contribute to this process, and I have described my view of the relationship between Ordinary Mind Zen and Personal Construct Psychology (McWilliams, 2000; 2003). Although the general public tends to see meditation practice as emphasizing special experiences and transcendent issues such as "enlightenment," most Buddhist approaches emphasize awareness of the present moment as the key element of practice. Awareness of the present moment may sound simple, straightforward, and wonderful. However, our deeply held commitment to our beliefs and the way that we think about things tends to get in the way as we devote too much of our energy to maintaining, defending, and explaining our present way of looking at things, leaving too little left to pay attention to present moment events or life "as it is."

I would like to focus on two fundamental elements of Ordinary Mind Zen practice that bear particularly on this topic: awareness of thoughts and awareness of physical or bodily sensations. In fact, these two elements not only have importance for this topic; the Ordinary Mind view proposes that they represent the totality of human experience—that if we carefully observe our actual immediate experience we can only identify bodily sensations and thoughts and that all phenomena represent one or the other or a combination of the two (e.g., emotions). Zen perspectives do not hold exclusive rights to the proposal that experience occurs only as these two elements. For example, Rom Harré (Burr, 1995) suggested that human beings consist only of physiology and linguistic practice. Within the context of this general concept, the discipline of labeling thoughts and directly experiencing bodily sensations constitutes the central component of Ordinary Mind Zen practice (McWilliams, 2000). Let me describe what happens when I attempt to focus my awareness on these two elements.

Awareness of Thoughts

As I gain greater awareness of my thoughts, slowly and fitfully over many years of sitting prac-

tice, I have gradually come to see that beliefs and ideas that once seemed very important to me no longer carry such significance. I also notice that I don't have so many strongly held opinions about things, although others may suggest that I have just lost my memory and no longer know anything (and they might have a point). My Zen teacher, however, assures me that this occurs commonly with experienced meditation practitioners. From another perspective, I find that by sitting hour after hour watching the same kinds of thoughts cross my mind I eventually become rather bored with them. Ultimately, I find that with persistent practice, thoughts that once had a great deal of power over my life and the way that I responded to events have slowly come to have less power, increasing however so slightly the possibility that I might now consider new, fresh interpretations of events.

Let me return to the Ordinary Mind teachings and some specific awareness techniques. Bayda (2002) proposes that thought labeling breaks our tendency to identify with our thoughts and enables us to develop an appreciation for the content of thoughts, helping us see our most stubbornly held thoughts as just thoughts rather than truth or reality. Hamilton (in press) describes an approach to examining how thoughts distort perceptions that she refers to as "Tangled Thinking." Unclear thinking serves to maintain the self-centered identity through which we avoid revising our understanding. She describes several categories of thought processes: The tendency to view opinions as truth (e.g., "Abortion is murder," "Beethoven is the greatest musical genius"); confusing feelings and emotional reactions with facts (e.g., "I am afraid of motorcycles so motorcycles are dangerous"); criticizing, belittling, and rejecting others who differ from us (e.g., "conservatives/liberals—take your pick—are idiots"); over generalizing from limited information (e.g., ethnic stereotypes, constellatory con-*truing*); taking an extreme view at one pole of a construct dimension (e.g., "black or white thinking," or "slot-rattling" from one pole to the other); and assuming a double standard in which we provide a socially acceptable account of our own behavior while labeling others negatively for the same behavior (e.g., "I am relaxed and "laid back;" you are just lazy"). To assist with gaining awareness of such thoughts and weakening their tendencies, Hamilton describes a

thought labeling exercise consisting of repeating a thought verbatim, preceded by the word "thinking," as if mimicked by a parrot on your shoulder. Since our thoughts arise from the powerful conditioning of core constructs and beliefs, reinforced through social discourse, we tend to believe strongly in them. Over time, this thought labeling practice allows us to observe and witness thoughts, which we come to see as "only thoughts" and having no independent reality other than as a thought, similar to the social constructionist view that words do not represent reality but only other words.

Using invitational language

In each of the examples of tangled thinking described above I articulated the thought using the language of "to be" verbs, a common aspect of the English language that leads us to project qualities of our own construction onto an event (McWilliams, 1996). Kelly (1979) discussed this problem in terms of what he called the "indicative mood" of English and proposed an "invitational" mood as a way of speaking that proposes regarding an event in a particular manner without attributing the speaker's construing to the event. Social constructionists (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993) emphasize the extent to which knowledge derives from joint verbal interactions with others according to the discourse customs of particular verbal communities and how we mistakenly come to believe that words refer directly to things. A technique from General Semantics called E-prime (Bourland & Johnson, 1991), which excludes "to be" words from English, attempts to force the speaker to communicate direct personal experience rather than project attributes or qualities onto events (McWilliams, 1996, 2003). These perspectives agree on our tendency to use language, initially developed as a way to communicate with each other about our experience, in a manner that comes to see the words as possessing a direct connection to an independent reality. In addition to labeling thoughts, practices that require that we take responsibility for the qualities that we attribute to events can also assist us in gaining awareness of the constructed nature of our knowledge.

Bodily awareness

Repeated practice of thought labeling weakens their compelling importance and taking responsibility for language also reduces attachment to cherished thoughts. By following these practices over a period of time I occasionally get to experience quiet moments in which thoughts die down. Then what happens? Several constructivists (e.g., Leitner, 1985; Leitner & Thomas, 2003; Mills, 2003) have described the close relationship between core constructs and physiological functioning and deeper levels of experience, and these perspectives accord well with the insights gained from Ordinary Mind Zen practice. Openness to experience of the present moment requires gaining direct awareness of immediate bodily experience, along with understanding how construing evolves in close relationship with our bodies and how our bodily mechanisms become deeply interconnected with our meaning system (McWilliams, 2003).

Much as if I had finally fixed a loud and leaky car muffler and as a result of the relative quiet I now heard rattles and squeaks in the car that I had not heard before, sometimes when thoughts die down, I find myself aware of bodily sensations that I had not felt before. At first they seemed alien or temporary but I have come to see their long and chronic history, masked by the “noise” of the incessant chatter of thoughts. The physical sensations that I notice the most, aside from ordinary aches and pains, seem related to places that I have created tension. I find them most noticeable in the solar plexus, shoulders, and jaw areas. Perhaps they originated in the pre-verbal period. As I see their relation to thoughts, they seem clearly connected to core constructs and my self protective “armor,” arising since childhood as I tense my stomach, hunch up my shoulders, and clench my jaw, bracing for life’s difficulties while “spacing out” into thoughts. Through bringing awareness to these sensations, not trying to change them but to do my best to experience them, relaxing into the sensations without thought, they undergo their own transformation and change. Just as the thoughts ultimately appear as “just thoughts” I come to experience the physical sensations as “just sensations.” More importantly, this awareness leads to greater attention to the immediate present experience.

FURTHER REFLECTION

Ultimately, it seems to me, the actualization of applied constructive alternativism and the experiential manifestation of direct experience of the present moment arrive at the same place. Although I still have a way to go before I can speak with full confidence from my own experience, the ability to experience the present moment, noticing thoughts without attachment, experiencing physical sensations that arise and fall, could, I believe, include the falling away of attachment to core constructs, the narrative view of self, core beliefs, or ego. It could enable an active, moment-by-moment ability to construe events in a fresh, new manner, revising and replacing interpretations which themselves would fall away leaving openness to the next moment. This proposition, too, of course, requires further practice and further reflection.

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