

*Kenneth W. Sewell & Lynn J. Piper*

## **Book Review**

# **Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology** **2nd Edition**

**by Trevor Butt and Vivien Burr**

London: Whurr, 2004, Paperback, 149 pages

\*

reviewed by

**Kenneth W. Sewell and Lynn J. Piper**

University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, USA

## **WHAT KIND OF PARTY IS THIS AND WHY WOULD WE WANT TO COME?**

Trevor Butt and Vivien Burr have reprised their 1992 publication of *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology* (published by Whurr with reversed authorship order) with a volume that preserves most of their original structure and content, while also adding some new coverage and updating a variety of concepts and references. Readers who enjoyed and are well-acquainted with the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition would want to focus their attention to the added chapter on trauma (Chapter 15: “Am I Traumatised?”), the added section on systemic bowties (in Chapter 19), and the added references and resources at the conclusion of the book. The remainder of the additions are embedded elaborations or terminological choices that would not merit a full re-reading.

The *Invitation* is expressly extended to students of psychology and related fields. Students are invited to approach PCP via relatively non-jargonized language and learn enough to decide if more extended exposure to the approach is desired. Given this orientation toward students, it seems obvious that the other primary audience for the book would be PCP teachers and practitioners who might wish to refer interested students to a useful ‘first exposure’ to the theory. These two target audiences are represented in the present

two reviewers: the senior writer is a PCP veteran and university professor who often refers students to PCP primers; the second author is a graduate student in clinical psychology much closer to the beginning of exposure to PCP (although certainly not a pure novice to the field). Thus, we feel well able to speak to how well this book reaches its target audiences. In short, we see *Invitation* as a success. We will elaborate this opinion in the closing sections of the review, after describing and critically evaluating the book on a chapter-by-chapter basis.

In the Introduction (Chapter 1), Butt and Burr discuss the nature of knowledge and the nature of personality from a Kellian perspective, utilizing the metaphor that anticipation is more about asking (and revising) questions than it is about discovering definitive answers. They propose that the questions we often ask as psychologists may be more in need of revision than of answers. Thus, *Invitation* is structured by posing a series of questions (one per chapter) and then, usually (although not uniformly), leading the reader to doubt the utility of the question as asked—and thus to the construction of a more useful set of questions.

The first set of chapters (labeled Part I) falls under the general rubric of Constructive Alternatism. Chapter 2 asks, “Is That a Fact.” Here, the authors point out that ‘fact’ is usually contrasted with a myriad of attributions such as theory, imagination, or opinion—all being contrasts that lead to more blind alleys than useful tools. This distinction is particularly problematic when we attempt to understand people (the usual task of the psychologist). Although not explicitly stated by the authors, the implicit new question offered to the reader is, “How are you construing that?”

Chapter 3 extends the general discussion into a specific interpersonal domain by asking, “Are You Friends or Lovers?” By discussing this frequent question of relationship definition, the authors show how our social dialogue often constrains the roles we can legitimately play in each other’s lives. Not only does this question often hamper our ability to understand the lived experience of other persons’ relationships, the stubborn insistence on asking the question subtly pressures us to conform to one pole or the other *as if* there were no alternatives. Better asked: “How do the two of you relate to each other, and how is that working for you?”

“Am I Gay” is the question posed by Chapter 4. By discussing the problems with simplistic explanations of sexual orientation, and indeed by locating sexual orientation firmly within the cultural contexts in which it exists, Butt and Burr compellingly invite us to understand the powerful nature of culturally endorsed frames of reference while simultaneously emboldening us to question their facticity in individual lives. Perhaps “Am I *being* gay?” and “What are my desires and options? are the more useful questions.

Likewise, “Are You Ruled by Your Head or Your Heart” (Chapter 5) addresses the dichotomy of cognition and affect that Kelly and others have found so problematic. The authors introduce the original Kellian perspective on emotions (the epiphenomenal conception of emotion as the experience of constructional shift) but eventually migrate more to an elaborated notion of emotional experience as being a form of construction/anticipation that is less verbiage-bound than are conscious thoughts. This latter framework is consistent with some of Kelly’s later writings and

correspondences (cf. Sewell, 1995) and is more fitting with the overall tenor of Butt and Burr’s arguments. Thus, it might be better to transcend the cognition-versus-affect dichotomy (via a broader conception of construing with and without verbal labels) rather than simply replacing it with a similar dichotomy that merely uses different terms (such as construing-versus-feeling). The question then becomes, “How do I ask questions with and without words.”

Part II explores The Nature of Personality and begins by asking “Can You Change Your Personality?” (Chapter 6). Butt and Burr adeptly point out the problems (both conceptual and practical) brought on by viewing personality as a *thing*. To the extent that personality is viewed as stable and internal, rather than ever-evolving and interpersonal, change remains daunting, if not functionally ruled-out. The authors explicitly provide a better question: “How can I act differently?” Although not made clear in this chapter, the rest of the book will make clear that this is not necessarily a simpler question, but it might be a more fruitful one.

Chapter 7 asks “Do Opposites Attract?” This question allows Butt and Burr to elaborate concepts of individuality and commonality as they relate to the formation of and maintenance of role relationships. This elaboration is complemented further by Chapter 8 (“What am I Really Like?”) in the discussion of how we actively construct/built our identities rather than discover ourselves pre-formed and hidden. Complex concepts of self-construction and psychological evolution are explained here in very natural language by Butt and Burr. There are hints of explaining the Kellian concept of role in Chapter 8, but it is not given the prominence that self-construction receives (a prominence that struck us as lacking). “What am I becoming/creating in my relationships with others?” emerges as the question better asked.

“What Made Me the Way I Am?” (Chapter 9) is a question often brought to psychotherapy (as is “What made him/her the way he/she is?”). Butt and Burr use this question as the launch pad for an excursion into the sense-making tendencies of human beings. People seem to structure their experience into tellable stories. The dominant cul-

tural metaphor of linear causation (borrowed from philosophy and physical science) is a compelling tool for people in their storying processes. Butt and Burr walk the fine line of acknowledging how people use their past to move into their futures, while insisting that the past is not a simple 'cause' of our present predicament or future prospects. Instead, they say that "We carry around our past with us in our construing" (p. 63) not as set of facts but as an arsenal of malleable tools that can be used for alternative future construction. "What kind of future can I envision?" can supplant the fixedness implied in the less useful question.

"Why Have You Changed?" (Chapter 10) offers the counterpart dilemma posed by viewing personality as fixed. The authors explain that PCP starts with an assumption of change rather than staticity. Thus, "How have you changed?" "How have I changed" and "What can our relationship be/become?" are the preferred questions.

Butt and Burr then turn to Reconstructing Illness (Part III) first by asking, "Am I a Neurotic?" (Chapter 11). In this chapter, Butt and Burr begin the discussion of how therapy is construed in PCP (a discussion that continues for the remainder of the book). Here the 'person as scientist' metaphor is skillfully extended to the therapy room, viewing the therapist as the research supervisor. Such a relationship can assist a person in asking more useful questions such as, "Which of my reactions and situations are bothering me?" and "Which ones can I change?"

Chapter 12, entitled "Why Worry?" explores the meaningfulness of the kind of intense human concern often labeled as excessive worry. The authors mainly focus on how idiographic 'psychologic' makes some circumstances potentially dangerous to one person, whereas her neighbor might see the same context as trivial. Only by investigating the interconnected meaning associated with the feared outcome can a therapist (or even a friend) hope to provide assistance. To ask, "Why worry?" implies that the worrier should simply drop her concern given that others do not share it. But to ask, "What implications are entailed by that feared outcome?" allows the helper to enter the lived world of the client, rather than tower above her as an authority.

Although Chapter 12 would have provided a nice segue into the added chapter on trauma (Chapter 15), it is followed instead by the question of "Am I Imagining This Pain?" (Chapter 13). Showing that even physical pain is subject to the human meaning-making process, the authors eschew the dualism and reductionism inherent in much of medicine and psychology—the kind of dualism that makes use of construct of psychological versus physical to imply that the former is illusory and the latter is 'real'. Instead, they argue that the psychological and the physical are merely two points of view from which to view a person and his difficulties. The better question then becomes, "What perspective is most helpful in this instance?" And the tentative answer can be allowed to shift between perspectives, or even to simultaneously situate itself within both perspectives.

Similarly, asking "Am I an Addict?" (Chapter 14) implies a pre-emptive use of the medical concept of disease as it is often applied to psychological and behavioral phenomena. The problem is not that viewing alcohol dependence (or coffee, or sex, or television watching) as a disease offers no utility. Indeed, such a construction may invite a kinder societal reaction than would be recruited by viewing the problem as a product of weak moral constitution. It might also imply hope, in that diseases can often be 'treated'. However, to forget that this construction is just that—a construction—implies its pre-emptive use. Thus, to view alcohol dependence as a disease often means that we view it as *nothing but* a disease. Discarding the concept of 'addiction' in favor of 'dependence', Butt and Burr leave us with better questions such as, "Can my dependencies be more effectively allocated?"

As mentioned earlier, Chapter 15 asks "Am I Traumatized?" The authors review some of the work by constructivist researchers in the realm of trauma, while suggesting some misgivings about the way that trauma is being construed more broadly by Western society in contemporary times. The question of "Am I Traumatized?" is not revealed to be of the same problematic nature as the titles of previous chapters. However, the question of "Was that event a trauma?" may be more problematic. Butt and Burr express concern

that persons may be all too primed to adopt the label of 'trauma' to simplistically categorize difficult experiences as insurmountable. Although not emphasized by the authors, relying upon the nature of the event to define trauma also disqualifies the legitimacy of some persons' experience whose system of meaning is completely derailed in relation to an event that appears to others as little more than a hassle. Rather than focusing on events as traumas, psychologists must focus on reactions, helping clients to ask questions like "Is my construction system viable in my current life context?" or "In what relationships can I feel safe enough to loosen and revise my meanings?"

Part IV continues the therapeutic train of thought by *Reconstructing Change*. Chapter 16 asks, "Do I *Really* Want to Give Up Drinking?" This chapter offers a therapeutic extension of ideas from Chapter 14 (with Chapter 15 somewhat disrupting the flow of this extension). The authors develop the process of helping a client to understand the meanings attached to dependency, rather than questioning the strength of their resolve. The question becomes less one of motivation, and more one of examination and decision-making. "Which do I prefer, the considerable benefits and liabilities of continuing my concentrated dependency on alcohol, or the benefits and very fearsome liabilities of giving it up?"

Chapter 17 asks the rather surprising question of "Can You Really Hypnotise People?" Although the relevance of this topic is not clear at first blush, Butt and Burr use the provocative topic of hypnosis to introduce the necessity for play and acting *as if* in generating creative change. By offering a conceptualization of hypnosis that assumes the context is providing a "safe umbrella" under which the client can explore ways of being and construing that are otherwise too threatening, the authors lead us to better questions about hypnotic and other types of interpersonal influence: "Can you help people recognize their own volition by asking them to pretend not to possess it?" or "How creative can we be?"

"Why Don't They Ever Learn?" (Chapter 18) concludes the section by exploring the limits of viewing complex human change processes as the mere acquisition of knowledge or skills. Espe-

cially when asked by a therapist about a client, this problematic question reveals a crucial lack of sociality that needs expansion in order to play an effective therapist role. Replacing this question with "What meanings does my client attach to this behavior that I've not yet realized?" or "From what feared consequence does this behavior protect my client?" would represent a more effective therapeutic stance.

The book's final section (Part V) explores *Measurement and Change* and begins with "How Can We Measure Constructs?" (Chapter 19). Although the authors do an admirable job of briefly and clearly overviewing repertory grid methodology, laddering procedures, self-characterization analysis, and systemic bowties (the latter of which is new to this edition), they do so with ample cautionary caveats regarding the nature of the target of such assessments. As argued throughout the book, constructs are viewed as questions people ask rather than as *things* people have. To measure constructs seems to imply the latter. To view a snapshot of a sprinter may tell me *something* about the runner, such as his form (at least on that particular occasion). But it tells me little about how fast he was running, how he came to run that way, or even where he was hoping to go. For Butt and Burr, construing in tandem with the person (rather than cross-sectioning them with a measurement tool) would give us something more like a video of the sprinter, or even (more usefully) something like a running lesson from the expert. If and when the assessor ignores the limitations of the assessment tools and begins to view the rows of a repertory grid as equivalent to the person's construction system, the assessment will likely be counterproductive. If, however, the assessor takes these limitations into account in the overall strategy of understanding the construing person, then the assessment tools become specialized forms of conversation that can be extremely useful to the skilled clinician. "How can I understand and anticipate this person's construing?"

Finally, "How Can I Change?" (Chapter 20) considers the complex task facing persons contemplating personal change. Do people *know* what they want before choosing what to pursue? For the PCP practitioner, the questions are better framed as "What are the ramifications of change

in this or that arena?” and “What kinds of experiments am I prepared to conduct to test out my possibilities?” The authors describe the loosening and tightening of construction necessary to provide tentative answers to these iterating questions. They further consider the important relationship between client and therapist, including an understanding of the role of the therapeutic relationship as an important context for new experiments, as well as a consultation room for the planning of experiments outside the relationship. Thus, “How Can I Change?” becomes “What new questions can I ask?”

We, as reviewers, ask ourselves a few overall questions about this *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology*. Specifically, we ask “To what extent have the authors succeeded in their attempt to invite us (and especially students) to PCP?”, “What kind of party is this PCP gathering?”, and “Why would we want to come?” To the first point, we consider Burr and Butt to have been largely successful in extending an effective invitation. Written to the level of a first-year graduate student, this *Invitation* straightforwardly contrasts PCP with other personality theories of change in clear, concise English. For British English-reading audiences (as represented by the second reviewer, L.J.P), the familiar cadence and word usage of the writers makes the text even more user-friendly. But even for an American audience of English readers (as represented by the senior reviewer, K.W.S.) the terminology and idioms, although occasionally unfamiliar, are easily understood and accessible. The hypothetical case examples to illustrate the discussion points are particularly effective in bringing the concepts to life for the novice to the field. The book is not without distractions, mainly in the form of awkward transitions between material indigenous to the first edition and material added for the second edition. For example, the Introduction chapter and the preliminary comments to Part III neglect to include the newly added Chapter 15 in the

overviews. Likewise, the end of Chapter 14 segues directly into Chapter 16 as if no new chapter intervened. Similar (although more subtle) transitional gaps exist when the additions were comprised of only a paragraph or a few sentences. However, the importance and clarity of the added information clearly outweigh the minor awkwardness in the transitions. All in all, we found the *Invitation* to be effective and appealing.

When interested students of psychology ask us where to start in familiarizing themselves with PCP, our answer will be *Invitation to Personal Psychology* first, then Kelly’s *A Theory of Personality* (1963) second. We have found the PCP gathering to be a welcoming and stimulating party...one in which we are eager to continue sharing questions.

## REFERENCES

- Burr, V. & Butt, T. (1992). *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. London: Whurr.
- Kelly, G. A. (1963). *A theory of personality*. New York: Norton.
- Sewell, K.W. (1995). Personal construct therapy and the relation between cognition and affect. In M.J. Mahoney (Ed.), *Cognitive and constructive psychotherapies: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 121-138). New York: Springer.

## REFERENCE

- Sewell, K. W., Piper, L. J. (2004). What kind of party is this and why would we want to come? - Review of: Burr, T., Burr, V. (2004). *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology*. London: Whurr. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 1, 21-27. (Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp04/sewell-butt04.pdf>)
- Received: 7 Oct 2004 - Accepted: 7 Oct 2004 - Published: 30 Dec 2004