PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY AND METHOD: ANOTHER LOOK AT LADDERING

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PCT AND ME

I would like to begin by saying how honoured I feel that Fay wanted me to contribute to the celebration of her eightieth birthday. I want to talk today about laddering, because we both think about it as a central tool in the personal construct psychologist's tool kit. We appear to have differed in what it signifies however. So I want to clarify what I was saying by contextualising it. This will involve some history and some repetition (See Butt, 2004a). But it will set out something of what the appeal of Personal Construct Theory (PCT) is to me - how it began, evolved and still elaborating. I think we will find that we may have a difference about the theory, but not about the value of the method.

This story began with my working for a PhD that ended up by nose-diving into the ground. As a clinical psychologist, I had been working on social skills groups with people who were socially anxious. I was enthusiastic about the approach, largely because then, in the early 1970s, it presented one of the few ways of helping people open to a psychologist working in the National Health Service. We had been trained in the application of the WAIS (the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales) and other IQ tests, as well as in giving a host of personality tests which were about as much use as horoscopes when it came to helping people to overcome psychological problems. Psychiatrists would read the reports, and generally see them as very perceptive if they provided backup for what they already thought about the patient. Writing them was more like a grammatical exercise than a psychological one: "Jane is shrewd even though quite extraverted, and manages to combine a certain confidence in some areas with a sense of insecurity in others". The psychiatrist would then pick out features that reminded me of the Monty Python sketch where two ladies are reading horoscopes: "It says I'm a 12-foot man-eating crocodile with glasses. Ooh – it's right about the glasses!"

Social skills training took people's complaints seriously, and tried to help them overcome them. My mentor was H. Gwynne-Jones, a marvellous man who for me embodied the radical spirit of the early behaviour therapists without becoming a mechanistic technique man. For him, the behaviour therapy project was about what he saw as a scientific approach to the patient: trying to make sense of the individual through a careful inquiry. It was what I recognised later as a pragmatic approach, and one that is alive today in PCT, even if it may have lost its way in behavourism and its heir, CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy). Studying with Gwynne, I had read and been most impressed with Walter Mischel's (1968) devastating attack on trait theories, and his advocacy of social learning theory. Being a student of George Kelly, Mischel strongly advocated personal construct techniques as ways of investigating the patient's system of meanings. All questionnaires gave you was an inexact picture of the person's self image. The RCRT (the Role Construct Repertory Test) and self-characterisation were designed to do this properly. If it was important to know how things looked to the patient, these were the methods to use.

And it was important. SST (Social Skills Training) was an approach that worked just fine for about half he people we picked for it. They took to it like ducks to water, and I can still remember people whose lives were transformed by it. But others got absolutely nowhere. Learning, say, to argue confidently never led to their feeling confident. Being apparently socially adept just felt like pretence. What's more, we could never predict who was going to be in which group. We tried various assessments – questionnaires, interviews, self-characterisations – and could never spot those who might profit. Hence the research question at the

heart of the PhD: How can we theorise what goes on in social skills training? Gwynne was my supervisor, and since I was using some PC techniques, suggested that Don Bannister might be able to help me think through a research strategy. Now, Don had just come up north and settled at High Royds Hospital, and it was there that I first met him. I can't say that we got on well to begin with. I had no interest in football, liked SLT (Social Learning Theory), and worst of all, was a bloody southerner! Later, we ended up in a group together, and became firm friends. But at this stage I was at arm's length from both him and construct theory. But Don did convince me that PCT provided a good framework for testing a hypothesis. I didn't have to believe in it to use it. This is one of the great things about constructive alternativism that I've seen Fay sum up beautifully in the context of fixed role sketches; you always have a causeway back to your old self. Don thought The Choice Corollary might be the key: SST assumed that people wanted to change in a particular direction. It took no account of threat. How they changed was the only issue; never mind what they wanted. Understand how they are open to extension or definition, and you will be able to predict who will be helped by what sort of therapy.

We envisaged a research programme of three stages: Look at people who had not been helped by SST and detail the sorts of features that appeared to be important. Then devise methods for investigating the elaborations open to different individuals and follow their progress in therapy. Finally, assess people going into SST and predict who will gain what out of it. The first two stages went along just fine. I wrote up as I went along, and we prepared for stage 3. But it was here that the project ran into the sand. I had devised two grids that provided measures, and they had no success at all in predicting anything. In those days, PhDs had to have a quantitative dimension, and there was no opportunity to extend it in the direction I would have liked – a series of individual case studies. It would have to be back to the drawing board: new measures and a new procedure. Of course, negative results, it can be argued, are as useful as positive ones, and I'm sure something could have been salvaged. But there was just no discernible pattern here that might form the basis of an alternative explanation. And then, at this time, I had a new job as a lecturer, a new baby and too many commitments for the energy that would have

been involved.

What was there to salvage? Well, Don and I jointly authored a chapter on two early case studies (Butt & Bannister, 1986). And we concluded that my attempt to operationalise the choice corollary in grid form rested on too mechanist and hierarchical a view of the construct system. Everyone had a different image of what a construct system looked like, and the cone-like hierarchy had become accepted, perhaps prematurely. In private, Don could be critical of PCT. Eventually, he would have his say about what he thought needed rethinking. But he was too much of a politician to criticise it in public. Too many enemies in CBT and psychoanalysis, Don thought, to allow any breaking of ranks among construct theorists. Certainly he, with his leading role, shouldn't be seen as a critic of the theory. But he was all for its elaboration.

HOW TO ELABORATE PCT

Like many great theorists, Kelly talked in more than one voice. There is certainly a strong phenomenological voice: his description of the use of self-characterisation and its analysis is a beautiful example of it. A professor of phenomenological psychology I know who has always resisted the notion that Kelly was a phenomenologist admitted he would have to think again after reading this. Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception (1944/62) wasn't available in English when Kelly wrote. Had he been able to read it though, he would have seen that his own objections to the phenomenology as intensely private and intrapsychic form the basis for the whole of Merleau-Ponty's work. But there is a second voice. At the same time that Kelly wrote about the perception and construction of individual worlds, much of the language of the 1955 book (particularly the theory development in Volume 1) has been described as a 'quasi-engineering' voice. Construct systems could be read as rather like mechanical devices. There is a search for lawful relations and the laws governing human behaviour. The Modulation Corollary (Kelly, 1955) is a good example here. Superordinate structure *determines* subordinate construction. This is a causal connection. Kelly deals with the freedom / determinism issue like this: everything is determined with respect to some things and free with respect to others. In a

construct system, the superordinate determines the subordinate. Now this is something of a slight of hand because it is an acceptance of determinism and causal relations in human conduct. Like a hierarchical bureaucracy, everything is determined by things above it, even if it in its turn determines things below it. There is a degree of freedom in *how* orders are carried out, but carried out they must be. No determinist would claim more! Maybe this is what a scientific approach needs – the ability to develop what Rue Cromwell (2004) calls 'brittle hypotheses'. It sets up an aspect of the theory that is open to test. But Rue also agrees (2006) that in his work after 1955, Kelly adopted a voice that was less steeped in this 'scientist' model. And in 1970, Denis Hinkle reported Kelly as saying:

> *"I wondered in writing construct theory if I could devise a way to help (psychologists) discover people and yet feel scientifically respectable in doing that. At the time I was already concerned that it might be too far from the mainstream to be regarded as psychology, but now - yes- I think would have written it more honestly."* (Hinkle quoting Kelly, 1970: 91)

More honestly! Well, I don't know about that, but I do think that what needs re-thinking is the search for lawful and causal relations in human psychological processes. After my crashed PhD, I was beginning to conclude that all notion of cause and lawfulness in human action was misleading. Construing is about reasons, not causes, and human conduct calls for understanding and not explanation. It was Dilthey (see Butt, 2004b) who argued this distinction, and understanding here means getting inside the world of others to make sense of what they are doing. This is the phenomenological project, and it has always seemed to me that PCT is part of it. Indeed, it offers much better ways of getting at people's experience, in my view.

If you look at phenomenological methods you find overwhelming reliance on the semi-structured interview. There is such emphasis on not leading the research participant in any direction that anything else is distrusted. There is an assumption that people can tell you what things mean to them, given time and encouragement. But this isn't what I've found. I think people need help in reaching for what things mean to them. And this is where laddering, Finn Tschudi's method, the Salmon Line and the various ingenious methods devised by others (see, for example, Salmon, 2003; Fransella 2003; Denicolo 2003) are all invaluable tools. All help people to spell out latent meanings that are infused in (but not determine) our action. So when a habitually reticent person continues to act in what the therapist sees as a submissive manner, she is probably doing several things at the same time, some obvious to her and some not so obvious. Whenever anybody checks the gas taps, loses his temper, worries about money or has sex, the meanings attached to each action will be complex and often ambiguous. Along with Merleau-Ponty, and indeed George Kelly, I don't think we can ever arrive at a once and for all cause or a real self that lurks beneath the surface and provides the answers to the puzzles of action. In phenomenological jargon, the lived world is ambiguous; it carries many often-conflicting meanings at one and the same moment. When we are thinking about human conduct, there are no simple causes.

This then, was the context of my writing about Laddering (Butt, 1995a, 1995b). Laddering is an interesting technique. It reaches parts that other orthodox phenomenological methods don't. But I would resist the idea that it ascends a construct system. Sometimes it may look like this, but sometimes it doesn't. What in my view is misleading is the image of a construct system as cone-shaped with superordinate constructs at its peak governing layers of subordinate construction below. Clearly some constructions are more important, more central to the person than others. They are not always those with the greatest ranges of convenience, but they are what Richard Bell terms in an asymmetric relationship with subordinate constructions. A implies B, but B does not imply A. I think the problem occurs when we think of something like a chain of command in which these asymmetric relationships are linked in a logical way: A implies B implies C implies D and so on.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Now, where does all this leave us? Well, I believe that there is an issue about the structure, indeed the very nature of construct systems, to be thought through. But there is surely no doubt about the value

of laddering. Valuable as it is however, I don't think it reaches superordinate constructs at the top of a hierarchy, governing constructions beneath them. Fay writes that laddering is more of a skill and an art than a technique. And her account of it underlines it as a flexible application of the credulous approach, surely the best type of phenomenology that attempts to get at how the world appears to the client. And as she uses it, it is a beautiful example of what I was saying earlier: what she describes as this structured interview nicely extends phenomenological psychology that relies too heavily on a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews.

One of PCT's great strengths is in its methods – certainly the repertory grid, but also the other qualitative methods that add to the phenomenological researcher's toolbox. In the fragmented world of contemporary psychological theory, researchers (in social psychology particularly) want more ways of helping people describe their worlds. Let us do what we can to promote these methods to this wider audience.

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