

# A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF MY RELATIONSHIP WITH PCP

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## INTRODUCTION

When I began to think of my brief for this presentation, i.e. “what PCP has meant to me, what I have done with it and where it might go?” I realised that it conjured up what the philosopher Dilthey termed ‘connecting threads’:

*“The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created connections which he is now putting in to words ... the units are formed by the conceptions of experience in which present and past events are held together by common meaning. Among these experiences those which have special dignity, both in themselves and for the passage of his life, have been preserved in memory and lifted out of the endless stream of forgotten events.” (Dilthey, 1976, p.215)*

So what follows is not a traditional academic paper but reminiscences of some of my experiences with PCP which I have ‘lifted out’ to share with you today.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

My first formal exposure to PCP was as an undergraduate student at Brunel University. Unlike at many British universities, Kelly’s theory was part of the Psychology Course. I had an opportunity to compare and contrast many different psychological perspectives but kept coming back to Kelly’s ideas. I found that his ideas resonated with how I felt about how we learn and potential blocks to learning.

Several years earlier, I started a ‘Pure Science’ degree at the time when chemistry nomenclature was changing. When I asked why this was the case I was told “You do not need to know just learn it”.

Up until that point learning had been a joy but now I was disillusioned. As you might expect I neglected Chemistry but was drawn to Psychology, which was offered as a fourth subject but was seen as incidental part of the course. I decided to withdraw. I did not let myself be trapped by parental and others’ expectations. I was not to become a victim of my biography. I vowed to respect the right of students to question the knowledge offered by their teachers and realised the importance of constructive dialogue. This is a fundamental tenet in PCP. So I suppose this was when I first became an advocate of Kelly’s ideas without knowing it!

When I finished my Psychology degree I stayed on to teach part-time and joined Brunel’s Centre for the Study of Human Learning to complete my PhD. The Centre, directed by Laurie Thomas was recognised as one of the main institutions applying Personal Construct Theory and grid techniques in education. Working with Laurie, I was able to explore further my interest in PCP and its implications for Education. At the Centre, which was a pioneer in the development of interactive programs for the elicitation of Repertory Grids, I was involved in field testing these programs and also in its consultancy work. One memorable assignment was for a well-known High Street firm who requested us to help with their quality control at one of the factories supplying goods. This involved us eliciting constructs about faults on men’s underwear! Faults were passing through the quality control line if they were *inside the garment* but were rejected if the fault was *on the outside of the garment*.

Whilst completing my PhD I presented a paper on Student Teachers’ Reflections on their Training at the first International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology in Oxford, 1977. This was an exciting experience - meeting in person many of the authors whom I had read in the course of my study. I can distinctly remember the night several of us, now highly respected academics, used a radiator in one of our rooms on which to create a repertory

grid. One hilarious evening that convinced me that PCP folk were fun. The recent European PCP conference in Sweden did much to validate my construing! PCP researchers who attended demonstrated their creative talents at sessions convened by Jörn Scheer and Vivien Burr and their capacity for late night musical sessions.

International PCP congresses have become an important feature in the development of PCP - facilitating international co-operation, research and friendship. Our special Birthday Girl, Fay Fransella, edited the conference book and I had the thrill of seeing my first research paper in print! By this time I was committed to pursuing a career as an academic and researcher and exploring the potential of PCP in informal and formal educational contexts.

### **WHERE DID MY EXPLORATIONS TAKE ME?**

On leaving Brunel I joined the Institute of Educational Development at Surrey University. There, together with John Gilbert, I formed the *Personal Construction of Knowledge Group*. A main focus of the group was Science Education and our research had considerable influence on the development of constructivist approaches to science teaching in schools. The major association of science educators in Britain (Association for Science Education) recognised the need to explore other psychological models such as that of Kelly in terms of their implication for learning and teaching in Science.

The group attracted a number of postgraduate students and I found that postgraduate education was to be one of the areas I valued most during my academic career. I have introduced PCP to scores of students and been called upon to examine many doctorates which have PCP as a philosophical and methodological underpinning.

One particular student from those days was Pam, now Professor Denicolo, who has become my lifelong friend and co-researcher in PCP. I left the University of Surrey after eleven years to take up a professorship at the University of Reading. One aspect of postgraduate education we stress is the importance of Research Training. At Surrey and later at Reading we created an education and training course, which received ESRC mode recognition. Core tenets of the course were that students would

be exposed to a range of approaches, be able to make personal choices and be expected to justify their decisions. Students are encouraged to explore personal meaning as researchers and engage in constructive dialogue with their supervisors.

Alongside other approaches students are introduced to PCP, the philosophy of Constructive Alternatism, Repertory Grids and other techniques consistent with PCP philosophy. We have used repertory grids in our research but the development of alternative techniques is something I believe has been of benefit to us, our students and those who have read our books and articles. These have included narratives, 'snakes' or 'rivers' of experience, Illuminative Incident Analysis and Interview about Instances.

The *Research Centre for Personal Construct Psychology in Education* (which Pam and I co-directed) has had many visitors, often from overseas. We have also been invited to give workshops in Britain and abroad. Our research and development work in PCP has led to many invitations to travel abroad. As well as attending International Conferences I have run workshops in Italy, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Australia and Canada. In addition to these visits abroad I have also supervised students from Taiwan, China, Pakistan, Turkey, Cyprus, Iceland, Sweden, Hong Kong, Brazil, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

These have been rewarding experiences – introducing PCP to many who had not had the opportunity to consider its implications for education and also my learning a great deal from exposure to other cultures. I have derived a great deal of pleasure in seeing others have a Eureka type of experience when they find PCP has relevance for their research, work or personal life. Many also report that they are continuing to develop PCP approaches in their own countries.

### **RESEARCH**

As indicated earlier, my research focus has been the implication of PCP in educational settings, in schools, higher education and professional arenas. This has led to me developing contacts with researchers who may not come to PCP conferences but are using PCP in their work and research. The

International Study Association on Teachers and Teaching (of which I was Chair for a number of years) have many members who approach their research and educational practice using the epistemological thrust and constructivist research methodologies implied by PCP as a basis for their work.

The following are the areas through which I have explored the utility of theory and methods of PCP. They are testimony to the diversity of contexts to which PCP may be applied.

Science Education:

*Teaching and learning in chemistry*  
*Teaching and learning in physics*  
*Curricular philosophy and Students' personal epistemologies of science*  
*Children's' conceptions of:*  
*Energy*  
*Change*  
*Food*

Teacher Education: initial and in-service:

*Teacher thinking and practice*  
*Teacher and student teacher stress*  
*Teaching of English as a foreign language*  
*Teaching of physical education*  
*Teacher identity*  
*Dance education*

Higher education:

*Learning climate*  
*Individualised learning*  
*Engineering design education*  
*Career decision-making*  
*Student study skills*  
*Staff development*

Health and nurse education:

*Smoking and health education*  
*Inter-professional practice in nursing*  
*Constructs of infection control*  
*Assessment in community nursing practice*  
*Care of the elderly*  
*Learning disability nursing*

For further information on most of these areas see: Pope & Denicolo (2001) and Denicolo & Pope (2001). *Transformative Professional Practice: Per-*

*sonal Construct approaches to Education and Research* London, Whurr

## THE WAY FORWARD

We have been asked to consider whether PCP? I hope that academics and practitioners will continue to explore the rich potential of PCP in diverse areas. I have touched on the range of areas in education that my colleagues and I have found it fruitful. The literature abounds with other examples in management, health settings and therapeutic applications. However, I suggest that there are two arenas where PCP has been underplayed. The first is the spasmodic inclusion of PCP in undergraduate education. I have been lucky in my career to have encountered Kelly's ideas whilst I was an undergraduate. Others are not so lucky. Even in Reading students in the Psychology department have had to come to Pam or myself for help with theory and method. There may be a cursory mention as part of a course in constructivist approaches but no thorough analysis.

The second area is that of conflict resolution. Identity is an area that has attracted the attention of the PCP community. I wonder how much work is or could be done to use PCP notions of, for example, identity, sociality, commonality, hostility, threat within international politics?

## WHAT IS IN A NAME?

In conclusion I would like to make a plea for the retention of *Personal constructivism*. I regretted the change of name of the International Journal from the Journal of Personal Construct Psychology to the Journal of Constructivist Psychology. Likewise it is sad that the North American Personal Construct Association has dropped 'the Personal'. For me the person is the essence of psychology theory and practice. As an academic I can fully appreciate the common links between Kelly's ideas and various brands of constructivism. These are to be explored and recognised. I can also appreciate that there are political imperatives that can impinge on academics in order to be recognised, accepted and get published. It takes courage to stand against the tide. But from time to time it is important to celebrate the strength of Kelly's work, as a founder constructivist,

in terms of its emphasis on the person and his/her personal meaning.

Let me close by wishing the Centre for *Personal Construct Psychology* well in its new home. May the seas be calm and a fair wind blow! Fay and Roy will appreciate the nautical metaphor. I wish many happy returns to Fay who, by her inspiration, has done so much for Personal Construct Psychology in the UK and abroad.

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*This article is based on a talk given at the conference on 'PCP: a personal story' organised by the Centre for Personal Construct at the University of Hertfordshire on September 29, 2006.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Pope, M. (2007). A personal account of my relationship with PCP. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 4, 46-49.

Retrieved from:

<http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp07/pope07.pdf>

Received: 30 Dec 2006 - Accepted: 5 Jan 2007 - Published: 31 Jan 2007