

WHY WE BEHAVE AS WE DO

Dorothy Rowe

University of Middlesex, London, UK

When I arrived in England in 1968 I went to work at Whiteley Wood Clinic in Sheffield. This was the professorial clinic for the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Sheffield. Alec Jenner had just been appointed professor, and he had a large research grant with which he planned to discover the biological basis of mood change. Alec suggested to me that I should take as my PhD research the topic 'Psychological aspects of people with regular mood change'. It turned out that no such people actually existed, but at that stage I accepted Alec's word that they did.

My immediate problem was to find some way of measuring change. In those days all psychological tests were reliable, that is, they didn't measure change. Someone in the Psychology Department at Sheffield University mentioned of a technique called a repertory grid, and my colleague Peter Clark told me about his great friend Don Bannister. Peter advised me to go to a conference on George Kelly and Personal Construct Psychology which Don was organising at York University. So I went, and I found that PCP was the first and only kind of psychological theory which actually related to real human beings. That was wonderful, and also wonderful was meeting the Gang of Four, Don, Miller Mair, Phil Salmon and Fay Fransella.

Eight years later Don played a major part in the biggest change in my career, perhaps my life. He liked the book I had written about my research into the way depressed people thought, and he introduced me to Michael Coombes of the publishers John Wiley. They published what proved to be my first book, *The Experience of Depression* (now called *Choosing Not Losing*). Don's early death was a great loss to me, as it was to all of us. His death was followed far too swiftly by that of Phil Salmon in 2005. I count myself as fortunate to have been able to be with Phil and carry out some of her wishes, but I have to report that her death from cancer was exceedingly painful. Phil's death showed only too clearly that we do not live in a Just World.

Fortunately, Miller and Fay are still with us, though just where Miller is is something I'm never sure of.

Rather than give you an account of the many interesting and satisfying events in my life involving Fay I want to mention just one, a lecture she gave at a PCP conference a long time ago. Nuclear physics had just started to enter the public consciousness and Fay decided to inform us about the peculiar behaviour of nuclear particles. Thus I discovered that Fay, like me, had realised that to understand ourselves we need to understand the world we live in, not just its history and its current events, but its physical nature along with our beliefs about its nature, and how we perceive the world. Science and philosophy are essential parts of understanding ourselves.

Philosophers have always argued over whether we can be aware of absolute truths or whether all we can know are our own relative truths. Plato insisted that there were perfect forms which existed eternally outside time and space, and which could be apprehended by exceptional people like himself. In contrast, Epictatus noted that, "It is not things in themselves which trouble us but our opinions of things." Historically Plato outshone Epictatus because people who would be powerful favour the idea of being in possession of absolute truths. However, over the last twenty years neuroscientists have shown beyond doubt that Epictatus was right. All we can know are our own individual truths, the constructs, hypotheses, meanings, fictions – call them what you will – that our brain creates from our experience. Since no two people ever have exactly the same experiences, no two people ever see anything in exactly the same way.

Thus what determines our behaviour is not what happens to us but how we interpret what happens to us. The neurologist Antonio Damasio explained how the brain operates:

"The neural patterns and the corresponding mental images of the objects and events out-

side the brain are creations of the brain related to the reality that prompts their creation rather than passive mirror images reflecting that reality . . . There is no picture of the object being transferred optically from the retina to the visual cortex. The optics stop at the retina. Beyond that there are physical transformations that occur in continuity from the retina to the cerebral cortex. Likewise, the sounds you hear are not trumpeted from the cochlea to the auditory cortex by some megaphone.” (Damasio, 2000, pp. 199-200)

What this means is that we are incapable of perceiving reality directly. All we can perceive are the meanings, or images as Damasio calls them, which our brain has constructed.

Something which psychologists need always to keep in mind is that, no matter how new and surprising your discoveries in your work might be, someone else has thought of it first. Nuclear physicists might discover something about the universe which no one else has ever known but in psychology there is nothing new under the sun. There are just different ways of describing and interpreting old ideas. It was Damasio who made me realise that the philosopher Spinoza had already covered what I write about – how preserving our sense of being a person is always our top priority, and our efforts to preserve our self are closely linked with our need to see ourselves as good, in whatever way we define ‘good’.

Spinoza was a Portuguese-Jewish philosopher, born in 1632, who spent his short life in the Netherlands. He studied but rejected Descartes’ proposition that the soul (or mind) was separate from the body, a concept which has been an enormous impediment to our understanding of ourselves. In his great work *The Ethics* Spinoza proposed that the mind and body came from the same substance and are, in effect, one. He saw too that the self, what you call ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘myself’, and what Damasio has shown to grow slowly as the brain develops, strives to survive, and out of such striving comes a notion that dominates our lives, the idea of the necessity to be good. (If you are a sibling, remember how much time you spent trying to prove to your parents that you were ‘gooder’ than your siblings, and how dreadful you felt when you failed to achieve that. (Rowe, 2007)

Damasio wrote:

“The quote comes from Proposition 18 in part IV of The Ethics and it reads: ‘. . . the very first foundation of virtue is the endeavour (conatum) to preserve the individual self, and happiness consists in the human capacity to preserve itself.’ In Latin the proposition reads . . . virtutis fundamentum esse ipsum conatum proprium esse conservandi, et felicitatem in eo consistere, quod homo suum esse conservare potest.” (Damasio, 2004, p. 170)

Spinoza wrote in Latin and the words he used have connotations slightly different from their equivalent in English. ‘Virtutis’ is translated as virtue but it also means in Latin having power and the ability to act. We all want to think of ourselves as being good, and we all know the importance of being in charge of our lives and getting things done. Also, the Latin word ‘conatum’ is translated here as ‘endeavour’ but it means more than just trying. There is a sense of seeking and striving. The animal scientist Temple Grandin, drawing on the work of the neurologist Jaak Panksepp, pointed out that the emotion of seeking is a primary emotion along with anger and fear. She wrote,

“Animals and humans share a powerful and primal urge to seek out what they need in life. We depend on this emotion to stay alive, because curiosity and active interest in the environment help animals and people find good things, like food, shelter, and a mate, and it helps us stay away from bad things, like predators.” (Grandin & Johnson, 2005, p. 94)

Human beings not only look for good things to stay alive but they also seek those people and situations which will support their sense of being a person.

In her work Fay has shown that the meanings we create are all connected to one another. These meanings form a structure of meaning, and it is this structure of meaning which develops the sense of being a person which we call I, me, myself. You are your structure of meaning, your structure of meaning is you.

We endeavour, as Spinoza said, “to preserve the individual self, and happiness consists in the human capacity to preserve itself.”

Personal construct psychologists have already placed George Kelly in the Personal Construct Hall of Fame. I propose that we add to the Hall of Fame another three great personal construct psychologists, Epictatus, Spinoza and Fay Fransella.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Rowe, Ph. D., is Professor at the University of Middlesex, London, UK. All of Dorothy Rowe’s work is based on the assumption that what determines our behaviour is not what happens to us but how we interpret what happens to us. Her latest book is *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: The Making and Breaking of Sibling Bonds* (Routledge, April 2007).

Email: dorothy@dorothyrowe.com.au.

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