

PROMOTING WORLD WIDE WISDOM: PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY AND THE INTERNET

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Among the many groundbreaking inventions that happened during my lifetime, two have been of special importance to me: the *Psychology of Personal Constructs (PCP)* and the *World Wide Web*. How they connect, is the subject of this paper.

MY INTRODUCTION TO PCP

As for my becoming acquainted with PCP, I was lucky. In the early 80s, one of the research assistants in our department had developed an interest in PCP for whatever reason. He played around with grids, e. g. eliciting mutual assessments of marital partners. I watched what he was doing, talked to him a lot, found the method intriguing and became increasingly interested in the theory underlying it. The next step was that I had a doctoral student look into doctor-patient relationships between women and their gynaecologists, using repertory grids. She produced interesting findings concerning the role of the doctor among the relevant others of the women she interviewed, and after a while I got hooked.

PCP was even less known in Germany than in some other European countries. *Inquiring Man* (Bannister & Fransella, 1977) had been translated into German in 1981 but had appeared in a publishing house outside psychology which focuses mainly on theology, history and philosophy. In 1986, the first three chapters of Kelly (1955), following the 1963 English paperback edition, were published in German in a small and even more marginal house. Although Kelly was mentioned in some psychology textbooks, that did not have an impact on the reception of PCP in academic psychology which remained insular at best. I then learned about a few local groups interested in Kelly, and joined what called itself the GGG or German Grid Gang, the nucleus of the German PCP group – a dozen or two people who met three times in a year, none of them in an influential or at least secure academic position.

So I am one of those who discovered PCP relatively late in their professional life. I was over forty and had been a professor for a couple of years. That means I did not have to cope with ignorant supervisors, a hostile faculty, or lack of access to university resources.

But was I really lucky? Maybe my professional career would have taken a different direction had I discovered Kelly earlier! When I began studying psychology, in 1962, modern empirical psychology was just about set to take over the academic chairs in West Germany. Until then, psychology in Germany had more or less recovered from the drought in the Nazi era by recurring to the psychology dominant in the 1920s. This did not include psychoanalysis which was taught and practiced outside the university system. When academic psychology embraced the empirical approach favoured in Britain and the United States, we used North American textbooks because the German ones hadn't adopted the modern ways yet. We read Anastasi's *Differential Psychology* – the 3rd edition of 1958 didn't mention Kelly or PCP. Nor did Hall & Lindzey's *Theories of Personality* – the 1957 edition, or Guilford's *Personality* (1959), or Kretch & Crutchfield's *Elements of Psychology* of 1958. In our fundamental text on social psychology, by Kretch, Crutchfield and Ballachey, *The Individual in Society*, published in 1962, I later discovered a box describing an experiment by Bieri and Blacker on 'cognitive multiplexity' where they had used Kelly's 'Repertory Test'. I hadn't noticed it then, and Personal Construct Theory wasn't mentioned anyway. So I became an 'empirical psychologist'. Nothing I regret, really – but it *did* delay my exposure to PCP for more than twenty years.

USING PCP IN RESEARCH

So I discovered PCP after I had been working for a

couple of years in a Department of Medical Psychology linked to a Department of Psychosomatic Medicine in a Medical School: at the University of Giessen in Germany. My research focussed mainly on psychological processes in psychotherapy, in medical practice in general and in health psychology. Therefore I was able to use concepts based in PCP as well as the Repertory Grid Technique in a variety of research fields, including patients suffering from anorexia, colitis, psoriasis and hepatitis. Another area was the doctor-patient relationship in gynaecology, couples relationships and parenting, including constructions of the unborn child. We studied health behaviour in connection with smoking, and I was able to extend my field of research to ageing and attitudes towards death and dying. This led to studies conducted together with Julie Ellis in Australia on ageing and on the professional identity of nurses.

PCP AND ME

In the beginning, I was interested mainly in repertory grids – like so many other PCP colleagues new to the theory. Socialised in the tradition of hard-core empirical research, I had become increasingly frustrated with the often surprisingly unsophisticated psychological background of this kind of research. Streamlining the research design to the operational definition of isolated variables and assessing, even ‘measuring’ them, seemed to me to be too easy a way out of the epistemological dilemma that one faces when the human psyche tries to perform research on the human psyche in a ‘scientific’ way. The prevailing philosophy behind this kind of approach has rightly been termed ‘naïve realism’ or ‘naïve empiricism’, and I found this attitude unacceptable, at least for me.

Professionally, I had been brought up in a kind of Freudian working environment (in one of the few university hospitals with a, somewhat non-orthodox, psychoanalytic orientation), while philosophically influenced by an earlier exposure to existentialist and Marxist thinking. However, increasingly the often equally naïve self-righteousness of some of the psychoanalysts I knew appalled me. They seemed convinced that they were in the possession of the definitive truth, unconcerned with any need for empirical evidence beyond their case-based clinical

experience – of course, at least in part, this may be attributable to their embattled position between mainstream empirical psychology and purportedly scientific medicine.

In contrast, I found the modesty and the theoretical openness of the PCP scholars I met attractive. And I liked their view of mankind (or ‘humankind’) – their *Menschenbild*, as we say in German. To me, the famous metaphor of ‘man-as-scientist’ (ignoring the proto-sexist wording) included both humans as *shapers* and as *being shaped* (by environment, upbringing etc.), with *attaching meaning*, or meaning-making as the decisive link.

Consequently, when I began meeting ‘PCP people’ first on a national scale and then internationally, I started making friends on a level quite unusual for an academic or scientific community. I often wondered why the atmosphere at PCP conferences and congresses is so different from that at many other conferences I had attended. The latter are often extremely competitive, presenters seem to be rivals rather than colleagues, showing off and being seen and noticed are obviously the prime goals, and the younger and shyer newcomers are dealt with accordingly. I’d like to think that the much more cooperative spirit and the encouraging behaviour at PCP conferences is due to the general spirit of constructive alternativism and the acceptance of others and of others’ possibly differing opinions. But it may also have to do with the simple fact that going to (and shining at) PCP conferences does not necessarily increase one’s academic prestige or advance one’s career, so that only people who are really interested in the matter (and in the people) go to these conferences.

So what I received from my acquaintance with the PCP community was (and is) a psychological approach to the ‘human condition’ that I could (and can) embrace whole-heartedly, because I can agree with its basic tenets and welcome its implications.

GIVING BACK

Any human society or even community doesn’t work without a culture of giving and taking. What did I give back for what I took? It may help to refer to the phonetics of my personal name. As my name is not easy to pronounce for non-native speakers, at conferences I used to ask people to imagine the

English words 'to yearn' and 'to share'. That's what I do: *I yearn to share*. In that respect I am probably not different from the odd missionary or envoy who is determined to spread 'The Word' to the uninformed or unenlightened.

Well, there is something to it. Firstly, I am convinced that the Theory of Personal Constructs deserves wider recognition, and that its concepts and tools could be of eminent use for many professionals who have never heard of it. And that is the second, most important point. If you look at the number of copies printed of PCP books, and the number of subscribers to PCP journals, than it becomes obvious that, quite simply, most people who could be interested never had the slightest chance of even hearing (or reading) about PCP. Most academic libraries do not stock PCP books, the tiny bit about PCP that is handed over by academic teachers amounts mostly to not much more than "Then there was Kelly, 1955, an early version of a cognitive personality theory, and the repertory grid, a cumbersome procedure that doesn't match the criteria required of diagnostic tools". Sure, Kelly *has been* praised by some of his contemporaries, PCP *is* mentioned in some textbooks, there *are* people who have become infatuated with PCP. But by and large, PCP is virtually and widely unknown. Interestingly, when I talk to an educated lay person about what I'm doing professionally and speak about PCP, as my special field of interest in psychology, then a frequent reaction is: "But isn't that what psychology is about?" Well, it is, and it is not. If you look at the mainstream, these days the discipline seems to be more interested in the biological prerequisites or correlates of psychological processes than in the processes themselves.

Now, modern information technology has provided means to change this state of affairs. Of course, I mean the *World Wide Web* which enables the interested surfer to gain access to otherwise unknown shores. Being versed in using the Internet not only as the treasure trove that it also is, but as a means to distribute information, I set out to establish a number of web sites designed to spread information on PCP. I was inspired by the pioneering work of Mildred Shaw and Brian Gaines with their web site at the *Centre for Person-Computer Studies* in Calgary and the Internet discussion group initiated by David Nightingale (the *PCP mailing list*), and set up a 'portal' with information on PCP (including a

newsletter) through which everyone in the world with internet access (and with some command of English) can find a way into the community. As you may know, I am an avid conference goer (and conference organiser) because I love to meet like-minded people and friends, and hence I know many scholars and practitioners of PCP personally. This proved an enormous asset when I had the idea to initiate an *Internet Encyclopaedia of PCP*. I am old-fashioned enough to appreciate and even love books, and I think that Fay Fransella's *International Handbook of PCP* (to which I had the honour of contributing a little piece) is the definitive source on PCP fifty years after 'The Book' and probably for the fifty years to come. But I also believe that it needs to be supplemented and supported by an online medium. I am glad and proud that so many colleagues, including Fay Fransella, are working on that project (which I co-edit with Beverly Walker). The same considerations hold for periodicals. These days, few individuals can afford to subscribe to a printed academic journal, many libraries reduce their stock, the numbers of copies printed are minimal, and again the Internet seems to be the solution. Therefore, together with Trevor Butt, I have established a free online journal, *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, which is now the only journal devoted to PCP as other journals, in part for want of subscribers, have widened their scope to accommodate a general 'constructivist' community.

REACHING OUT

As a retiree, I no longer work in a professional environment: no more research students, no more funding, no more access to ordinary academic resources. Consequently, my interests have moved away from 'professional applications' of PCP. To me, the 'spirit of PCP' encompasses not only constructive alternativism, but also what I have called 'constructive internationalism' (Scheer, 1996) - in spite of the apparent Anglo-centrism of PCP which is probably due to its heavy reliance on language-based communication. My own experience with PCP colleagues all over the world makes me feel comfortable with this spirit of internationalism, and I have tried to express this in a book I edited (yes - a real book!) on *Crossing Borders - Going Places. Personal Constructions of Otherness*. And, indulging in

a personal soft spot (or rather a passion), I have invited a number of PCP colleagues to contribute to a book on *Creative Construing. Personal Constructions in the Arts* that I co-edited with Kenneth Sewell this year. Incidentally, Fay Fransella wrote a chapter on 'Kelly and poetry' for this book. And I am enjoying tremendously the flourishing *Arts-and-PCP Network* that resulted from this co-operation.

Somewhere Kelly has mentioned that PCP itself may have a use-by date (those were of course not his words) and a limited range of convenience. The range of application of the theory however has been expanded dramatically during the last fifty years, far beyond psychotherapy. First education and organisations, then many other fields have profited from the induction of PCP ideas. Comparable probably only to psychoanalysis, PCP has developed into a kind of generic psychology that reaches out into a multitude of professional fields. Which seems paradoxical, given its limited visibility so far.

But do we have to stop here? I don't think so. In a paper presented at the International Congress on PCP in Huddersfield three years ago, I pleaded for an extension under the heading 'PCP and the small things'. Personally, I found PCP concepts, the very idea of us construing permanently, the concept of anticipation, of 'living in time', the notion of validation and invalidation etc. often helpful in everyday situations, far from scientific reflection – including experiences such as 'going to the loo on a plane' (the title of my presentation). I have a vision that one day PCP might inform us (and others) in a way that makes life more reasonable and living more enjoyable.

WORLD WIDE WISDOM

Well, visions are visions, and as a former German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, used to say, "If you have visions you should see a specialist". If we look at the PCP community as it is, it is still a small congregation. The *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* (JCP, formerly the *International Journal of PCP*) has a paid circulation of under 200, the Mailing List has about 300 members, the free online journal *Personal Construct Theory & Practice* has a bit less than 500 subscribers. If we arbitrarily double that figure, we arrive at about one thousand. Not many! But possibly influential: There must be an unknown

number of students, disciples, readers, followers who don't appear anywhere in public. Some entries in the *Internet Encyclopaedia of PCP* have 300 'hits' per month. It seems there *is* a potential.

On the other hand: International PCP conferences are attended by not many more than a hundred delegates, wherein free availability of information on the Internet and reduced travel funding may have an impact. But do we want bigger conferences? Occasionally I hear voices indicating a preference for the comfort zone of small-scale meetings. But I think it is not only about us oldies feeling comfortable. We need to attract younger people, and from the evidence of the last couple of conferences I attended I think they are around. Would they prefer a more general 'constructivist' stance (as some of our seasoned professionals seem to do)? I don't think so. If they are interested, they are attracted specifically by the theory and techniques provided by PCP because they want to become practitioners or researchers, not necessarily philosophers. They know how to use the Internet *and* they want to meet the 'elders'. So we need both: cosy conferences *and* World Wide Wisdom.

I think the community needs to grow also because I believe, in all modesty, that society as a whole would benefit from its impact. Let's develop constructs that allow us to use the technology of the day to maintain the spirit – not the spirit of the past, but the spirit that has invigorated the PCP community for more than half a century now and continues to do so.

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The Internet PCP Portal:

<http://www.personal-construct.net>

The Internet Encyclopaedia of PCP:

<http://www.pcp-net.org/encyclopaedia>

The online journal *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*:

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

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