

LITERATURE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

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An attempt is made to show how introducing literature into sessions of psychological intervention can be used to help the client to see a situation from another point of view. It can facilitate sociality, bring out aspects of the self that have become hidden and widen the person's experience. The story within a novel may echo something in the client's life or offer an alternative way of dealing with what is troubling them. Reading a play can help people to be aware of their feelings and poetry will often lift them beyond a current state of depression or anxiety.

Keywords: *Anticipation, listening, experimentation, judgement, sociality*

One of the Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) books I've most enjoyed in the last two or three years is *Creative Construing*, which Jörn Scheer and Kenneth Sewell edited (Scheer & Sewell, 2006). With sections on literature, music, singing, dancing and acting we have a feast of the arts from a PCP point of view that we can find no-where else. (I'm just waiting for something on the visual arts.) The section on literature caught my attention particularly. And the first chapter, by Don Bannister (Bannister, 2006), took me back more than 20 years. I was at the PCP Congress in Cambridge in 1985 where he gave a talk on novel reading and writing.

He describes reading as an act of constructive anticipation and goes on to elaborate the process in terms of validation and invalidation. As we get to know the characters and turn the page we try to predict how they might construe the situation and at the same time we are placing our own bets on what will happen next. It struck me as I re-read the paper that he might also be describing the experience of listening to the client's story in a therapeutic situation. A major part of our task as we learn how people make sense of their worlds is to try to anticipate what they will make of what is going on and where he or she might go next. Our predictions may be validated or invalidated. It can be disturbing if we find our theories invalidated. But this can have the useful effect of making us tune in more sensitively to what they are really experiencing.

This led me to realise how much literature has played a part both in my life and in the work that I do with clients: it has enriched my own understanding of the world and I, like many of us I'm sure, have used stories, poems and plays to help people to look at their situation from other points of view. There have been many interesting papers written discussing the nature of stories and the place of narrative in the scheme of things. But I'd like to consider stories at a less exalted philosophical level. Novels and poems and plays are part of many of our lives. I'd like to look at how reading can be an adjunct to the important processes of exploration and experimentation in working with people. Which doesn't mean I under-rate the importance of clients' own writing or some of the books produced to help them help themselves.

READING AS A RESOURCE

When Kelly (1955, p. 595) discusses the skills needed by a psychotherapist he stresses the importance of our having a wide range of experiences, to help us make sense of the ways in which clients construe events. None of us can experience everything directly. Some of our understanding must come from other sources.

When a man came to see me about a difficult relationship with his wife it emerged in the third session that he was addicted to gambling. I've not experienced this myself or known anyone

close to me who has. But I had a vivid memory of the Grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Dickens, 1840-1841) and his agonising struggle with the magnetic pull of the card-table and the damage that it caused.

At one point, the old man has lost the last of his money and steals into his grand-daughter's room to take all the coins they have left.

The dark form was a mere blot upon the lighter darkness of the room, but she saw the turning of the head and knew how the eyes looked and the ears listened. There it remained, motionless as she. At length, still keeping its face towards her, it busied its hands in something, and she heard the chink of money. How slowly it seemed to move, now ... creeping along the floor. It reached the door at last and stood upon its feet. The steps creaked beneath its noiseless tread and it was gone... (p.300).

Nell follows him to his room and looks in.

The bed had not been lain on, but was smooth and empty. And at the table sat the old man himself; the only living creature there; his white face pinched and sharpened by the greediness which made his eyes unnaturally bright. Counting the money of which his hands had robbed her. (p. 302).

The following night the old man goes out again:

He returned – penniless, broken-spirited and wretched, but still hotly bent on his infatuation. “Get me money,” he said wildly as they parted for the night. “I must have money, Nell. It shall be paid thee back with gallant interest one day, but all the money that comes into thy hands, must be mine – not for myself, but to use for thee. Remember Nell, to use for thee!” (p. 306).

This enabled me to take my client's problem very seriously and listen credulously.

I had little idea what it could be like to live alone with a baby until I read *The Millstone* by Margaret Drabble (Drabble, 1965). The anxiety the mother experiences, the over-whelming love and the hopes that she can share with no-one – all this is told so movingly that when I came to

work with a young woman in that situation I felt I could share it with her. At one time I seemed to be inundated with clients who were in a state of desperate infatuation. I hadn't realised how desperate until I read Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (McEwan, 2006). Anyone wanting to understand something of life in a mining area can do no better than read some of Don Bannister's novels (e.g., *Sam Chard*, Bannister, 1979).

'Helen' came to see me. She was completely shattered by the death of her husband. She had been given leaflets on the stages of grief which made her angry. She said that there was no understanding of her reality. Some time before I met her I'd read Susan Hill's *In the Springtime of the Year*. It tells of a young woman, Ruth, whose husband is killed while cutting down a tree in the forest. We are taken from the moment when she *knows* that something terrible has happened, through shock, panic, intolerable grief, to her eventual acceptance of Ben's death, knowing that she has retained something of him that she can never lose. This experience is all the more powerful for being traced through the seasons of the year, where natural changes reflect changes in her emotions. I lent Helen *In the Springtime of the Year* and she brought it back, saying that Ruth's experience was so close to her own that it was like talking with her. She had copied down a passage which seemed to her to express where she could be:

'December came. It was Sunday. Ruth went out of the back door and walked half way down the garden to stand just between the apple trees in the place she had been that afternoon, when she had felt the shock at the moment of Ben's death. Her breath smoked on the steel-cold night air and the grass and the vegetable tops were coated with a thin frost, like powdered sugar.

She was quite alone. But not alone. She was the same person, Ruth Bryce. But not the same. She loved Ben and wanted him, and still did not know how she might live for the rest of her life. But Ben was dead, and he lay in his grave, and she would move on from one day to the next. There was winter. There would be spring (p. 169).

Helen had written a *self-characterisation* when she first came and she wrote another three months later, when we ended. The first is short and full of despair; she could see no point in going on. In the second, she is clearly sad, but is beginning to look towards and elaborate a future.

It is clear that for a character in a novel or a situation described to have real meaning for the person reading it, they must be able to identify with the other person and the feelings they experience. The judgement of the therapist here is crucial. Just as it is when setting up a *repertory grid* (will it confuse the client?) or asking for a *self-characterisation*. (Will this be threatening to this particular person?) One example where I misjudged was with a young woman who was alcoholic. I lent her Augusten Burroughs's *Dry* (2004): It's the story of a man's descent into alcoholism, his attempt at rehabilitation and final reluctant decision to give up drinking. She enjoyed it, found it very funny (which it is, as well as moving) but seemed to see no connection between him and herself. My tentative prediction about her had been wrong.

The mother of an eleven-year-old with Asperger's syndrome came, saying that she felt terribly guilty. It was not that she was to blame for his condition, but because she couldn't love him. As he grew older she found she could only feel angry with him and depressed. His father was wonderful. Would play with him, was strict when necessary but seemed to understand him. The parents often disagreed about how they should be with him. This had gradually caused a rift between them. They had a thirteen-year-old daughter, whom she felt very close to. She had no difficulty with her. She was afraid that the boy realised how she felt about him and deliberately played up. He was clearly jealous of his sister.

As she talked, it seemed that her main difficulty was the vast difference between her construing of the world and her son's. We discussed this, but the notion of there being such wildly different ways of looking at things confused her. She could make no sense of his sudden outbursts or his obsessive absorption in certain things. Although she had sociality with her daughter, she had none with the boy. I lent her a copy of *The*

Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (Haddon, 2003). It's the story told by a thirteen year old boy with Asperger's syndrome about how he set out to discover who killed a neighbour's dog. Throughout his telling we have examples of his passion for maths, his fear of being touched, his dislike of the colour yellow, his difficulty with jokes and many rituals that are important to him. We are given a vivid picture of how he feels when he is afraid or distressed: Here he's being questioned by a policeman.

The policeman said 'I am going to ask you again.'

I rolled back onto the lawn and pressed my forehead to the ground again and made the noise that father calls groaning. I make this noise where there is too much information coming into my head from the outside world. Its like when you are upset and you hold the radio against your ear and you tune it halfway between two stations so that all you get is white noise and then you turn the volume right up so that this is all you can hear and then you know you are safe because you can't hear anything else.

The policeman took hold of my arm and lifted me onto my feet.

I didn't like him touching me like that.

And this is when I hit him (p.8-9).

Later he has a shock when he discovers that someone has been lying to him:

...my brain wasn't working properly.

I felt giddy. It was as if the room was swinging from side to side, as if it was at the top of a very tall building and the building was swinging backwards and forwards in a strong wind. But I knew that the room couldn't be swinging backwards and forwards, so it must have been something which was happening in my Head.

I rolled onto the bed and curled up into a ball...

My stomach hurt (p. 141).

The woman found the book enlightening. It didn't immediately turn her anger with her son to love, but she realized that his experience of things was very different from hers. She felt sympathy for him for the first time since he was

small. She had been able to talk to her husband about him and was considering joining a group of parents with Asperger's syndrome children, something she had refused to do before.

CHILDREN

I haven't worked with children for some years now but when I think back something different was going on with them. In one sense stories were around in every session – passing references to fairy stories, to what they were reading in class or at home. But more often than not they invented the stories themselves and sometimes I did. There are some excellent examples of this kind of work in Tom Ravenette's (1997, 1999) writings and the two editions of *The Child Within* by Richard Butler and David Greene (Butler & Green, 1998, 2007), both of which are lovely. Therapeutically they serve one of two purposes: when a young child has been upset by abuse or loss, for example, he or she is unlikely to be able to talk about it directly. They may show us what is wrong in their play, in their behaviour towards others in drawing or perhaps in a story. If a young person has difficulty relating to others, finds it hard to read them, it can be helpful to get them to imagine what the characters in a story are thinking and feeling. It is possible to learn sociality, as long as we make it clear what the point of it is.

It seems that the facility for inventing stories is partially lost by adulthood, while the ability to relate to literature can grow. I have had stories, poems even a scene from a play written by adults, but this has been rare.

References to reading with children are more spontaneous. If a young person is upset in one session about a quarrel with a friend, say, it's no good bringing in a story a week later, showing how such a quarrel is healed. They won't know what you are talking about. The two are best friends again. No – it's that wretched maths teacher this time.

I worked with two small girls who had had *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) read to them. I asked them which they would prefer to be, a hobbit, an elf or a dwarf. One immediately said

'A hobbit because they are like us.' The other, who was rather large and unco-ordinated said wistfully 'An elf. They are thin'. When I talked to her mother about her difficulties I discovered that she had begun cutting down on food. It was possible at that early stage to steer her away from anorexia.

I asked a twelve-year-old boy to describe what was going on in a chapter from *A Christmas Carol*, (Dickens, 1840-1841) as if he were Bob Cratchit, where Scrooge is bullying him. Not easy. But he astonished me with the anger he expressed towards the old man in his head, while seeming so compliant. It led to a long discussion about injustice and poverty, which I doubt would have happened if I'd asked him about these things directly. This seems to me to be the best way of seeing whether a child has understood something written. More effective than any list of facts.

DRAMA

The examples I've given so far might be seen as literature brought in to psychological intervention to offer alternative ways of construing a situation. It is also possible to use it more indirectly, as a means of elaborating a person's sense of self. Most of us I'm sure use *role-play* (see above) and *enactment*, some *fixed role therapy*, but in asking someone to take on a character in a play who may bear little relation to the self, we are asking them to set up an experiment of a different kind. In his chapter on acting in *Creative Construing*, Kenneth Sewell (Sewell, 2006) shows how constructive psychology and theatrical experience are mutually informing: "constructivist psychological knowledge enhances the tasks involved in character-development and on-stage interactional listening." While "role-portrayal and on-stage focusing skills offer immense carry-over into the role of psychotherapist" (p. 166).

Another parallel I found was the need for more than one self at work in both activities. When acting, we need the self that is deeply involved with the character we are playing and the professional self who monitors what we are

doing – stops us bumping into the furniture. When we are engaged in therapeutic listening we need the self who is deeply involved in the client's story and the self who is making sense of that person and that story. Since the people I worked with were not psychotherapists I looked only at what they gained through developing the skills of actors and how taking on other roles extended their possibilities as people. Behaving 'as if' you are assertive, fearful, loving, suffering, can give you a taste of these experiences as you deliberately assume them. Acting the part of mother, father, boss, whistle-blower, you need to put yourself in the shoes of the character. You try them on for size and learn something new as you do so.

You may well laugh when I tell you that the group I worked with were people who stammered. But, in fact, many of those who stammer in life, as it were, are fluent when acting. As one of the things I aimed at was to help them reduce the obsession with disfluency which so many of them develop, it was agreed that they should look after their own speech. I was not there as a speech therapist. My interest was in the play or sketch and the acting. To begin with some of them were clearly focused on being fluent, but gradually the characters they played and the situations they were in took over and there were some very good performances. One or two were natural actors and there was no-one we couldn't cast. Over a number of years they did everything from Shakespeare to Pinter to Old Time Music-hall.

There were many changes in the members of the group. Some of it undoubtedly related to group dynamics and their growing understanding of one another. But to see a very reserved young man throw himself into the role of Henry V at Agincourt or a quiet girl relish the part of the wicked step-mother was very rewarding. Sharing an interest in acting was very different from coming together because of a 'problem'. They were interested in each other as people, not in what kind of disfluency they had. In rehearsal there was laughter, some arguments and general letting the hair down. When we went to the pub afterwards I noticed that, although several of them stammered when buying drinks, they we-

ren't thrown by it. As time went on they showed increasing insight into other people: the characters in the plays and even people whom they met day to day. One older man used to be hospitalised about every two years with psychotic episodes. As long as the group went on these didn't occur. Unfortunately I can't say whether this lasted as he moved away from London. Another experienced extreme anxiety and although he still had occasional panic attacks he felt able to talk about how he felt and the others knew how to listen.

After about three years I got them to compare the sorts of situations they were willing to engage in now and those before they joined the group. In most cases the difference was very striking. One or two of them were more fluent generally but the important difference seemed to me to be in increased confidence and a far more elaborated sense of self. This wasn't counselling and it wasn't psychotherapy, but it was certainly psychological intervention.

POETRY

Working with other groups on intensive courses, where we wanted a wide range of activities, I asked them to bring in a poem which had some particular meaning for them or said something about them. There were usually blank looks all round and a certain amount of chi-iking. But very few refused. (This was a while ago. Now I would probably ask them to bring in a poem or the lyrics of one of the latest songs.) It turned out to be a series of very interesting experiments. We discussed their choices when they'd read them out. A number of them simply said that they'd chosen a poem they remembered from school. Though they couldn't think why they had remembered it. When we explored further, however, some reasons for their choices emerged. One young man chose Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* (If I should die....). Apparently his grandfather had died in the First World War. He was older than the others and had us all wrapt with his account of a war in the trenches which the others knew nothing of.

The one girl in the group, who seldom spoke, read Walter de La Mare's *The Listeners*.

*'Is there anybody there?' said the traveller
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champ'd the
grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor:
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second
time;
'Is there anybody there', he said.
But no-one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men;
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the
dark stair
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
There stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starr'd and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head:-
Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word' he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the
still house
From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.
(p. 1107)*

She told us that her father used to read to her when she was small and this was her favourite. Although she had never understood what it was about. As the others in her group seemed to like it I asked them each to come up with a possible story related to the poem. To one, the listeners were ghosts, waiting for him to join them in the Kingdom of the Dead. Another said that the

house was full of enemy soldiers, ready to shoot him as soon as he turned his back. The girl herself thought it might be a woman he had come to rescue, but she found she couldn't call out to him. (As I said this was a girl who seldom spoke in the group). I was tempted to draw her attention to what she had imagined. But I didn't need to. One of the others clearly did and encouraged her to speak more. I couldn't resist including it here in case you didn't know it. My father read it to me.

Then there was the huge young man, built like a tank, who read Wordsworth's *Upon Westminster Bridge*. This was Monday morning, I'd given them the task for the weekend. Apparently he had got up early on Sunday and gone to the bridge so that he could see what it was like. His face was rather pink as he read but no-one laughed. He had shown a side of himself that we hadn't seen until now. One man read Browning's *Pied Piper of Hamelin* – in its entirety. He took almost as long explaining why he had chosen it, what meaning it had for him. He had been an only child and had no friends. He had clearly been bullied. He felt like the little boy who was left behind when the other children were led into the mountain. The reactions of the rest of his group were striking. No-one expressed any sympathy; one pretended to wipe his eyes. It almost brought out the bully in the others. And I found myself rather irritated by him.

Perhaps the greatest surprise was when a dour, silent young man read this by W.S. Gilbert:

*If you give me your attention, I will tell what I
am:
I'm a genuine philanthropist, all other kinds
are sham.
Each little fault of temper and each social de-
fect
In my erring fellow-creatures I endeavour to
correct.
To all their little weaknesses I open people's
eyes;
And little plans to snub the self-sufficient I de-
vise;
I love my fellow-creatures –I do all the good I
can-
Yet everybody says I'm such a disagreeable
man!
And I can't think why!*

To compliments inflated I've a withering reply;
And vanity I always do my best to mortify;
A charitable action I can skilfully dissect;
And interested motives I'm delighted to detect;
I know everybody's income and what everybody earns;
And I carefully compare it with the income-tax returns;
Yet to everybody's benefit however much I plan,
Yet everybody says I'm such a disagreeable man!
And I can't think why!

I'm sure I'm no ascetic; I'm as pleasant as can be;
You'll always find me ready with a crushing repartee.
I've an irritating chuckle, I've a celebrated sneer,
I've an entertaining snigger, I've a fascinating leer.
To everybody's prejudice I know a thing or two;
I can tell a woman's age in half a minute – and I do.
But though I try to make myself as pleasant as I can,
Yet everybody says I'm such a disagreeable man!
And I can't think why!
(p. 264)

We can hardly follow that! In one sense, though, it can be said to encapsulate the movement this group and others had made, at least in part through the introduction of literature in our sessions. The construing of most of them had loosened. With the poems in particular they were willing to be more personal and the topics of our discussions were of a different order. And I hope I have shown that the ways in which individuals made sense of the reading I suggested to them helped to move most people on.

Presented at the European Personal Construct Association (EPCA) Conference, London, July 2008

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peggy Dalton. I went to Oxford to read English, fondly imagining I'd be an English teacher and produce school plays. By the end of my stay there I had decided to go into the theatre. After ten years of that I thought I could spend my time more fruitfully and trained to be a speech therapist. Some years later I was dissatisfied with my understanding of the psychological aspects of speech and language difficulties and studied for the PCP Diploma. It's probably rather late to start anything else, but psychodrama?

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Literature and psychological intervention

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(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp09/dalton09.pdf>)

Received: 8 July 2008 – Accepted: 4 Febr 2009 – Published: 20 March 2009.