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Book Review

CONSTRUCTIVIST PSYCHOTHERAPY: A NARRATIVE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

By Gabriele Chiari and Maria Laura Nuzzo

London, New York: Routledge, 2010, Paperback, 214 pages, £ 20.99

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Kelly began *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* with a chapter on his philosophical position. Volume 1 elaborates the theory and Volume 2 its application in therapy. But he tells us in the preface that it wasn't written in this order. The theory arose from the clinical practice. In the last decade or so, we have seen a proliferation of therapies loosely titled constructivist. The problem with so many of these therapies seems to me to be that they lack any firm theoretical grounding. Some are based almost entirely in Kelly's work while others rarely mention him. There is often a model of the person as author or narrator, but then other narrative therapists don't call themselves constructivist and know nothing of von Glasersfeld, Maturana or Kelly. So a book like this one that provides a sound theoretical grounding is surely long overdue. This volume is the tenth in a Routledge series entitled *Advancing Theory in Therapy*, in which authors are asked to outline practice, explaining how it fits into a theoretical framework. And the book succeeds admirably. The first three chapters deal with this theoretical framework and the last three with its application to the therapy venture.

The book opens with what I found to be an excellent outline of personal construct theory. It is nicely supported with quotes from Kelly, Bannister and Fransella and shows how the focus of the theory was in personal change and reconstruction. I particularly liked the way in which

the corollaries are presented with helpful interpretations (for example: understanding others for construing oneself – the sociality corollary, and the constraint on change – the modulation corollary). We then have two chapters on constructivism; its roots and image of the person. Just what is psychological constructivism? Chiari and Nuzzo suggest that some definitions of are so broad that they would include most cognitive approaches. So, they argue, it is not enough to underline the person's ability to be proactive and anticipate events. Forty years ago, there was some weight behind Don Bannister's quip that orthodox psychology viewed the person as 'a Ping-Pong ball with a memory'. But since the demise of behaviourism, there are few psychologists who see the person as purely passive and reactive. Chiari and Nuzzo argue that psychological constructivism should refer only to those approaches that bridge the subject/object divide, that is, those that see perceptions neither as more-or-less good representations of the world, nor fixed in the interior world of the perceiver. Reality is both found *and* made, and constructivism looks at neither subject nor object pole, but at the correlation between the two, the world of the 'in-between'.

Chiari and Nuzzo point out that this focus is not new; it was at the basis of pragmatism in the USA, and phenomenology and hermeneutics in Europe. It seems to me vital that constructivists

are aware of the history and development of the approach to avoid perpetual reinvention of the wheel. It is important to build carefully on what has been done already in order to avoid the production of new overlapping and often confusing vocabularies. Chiari and Nuzzo's proposal for integration is for a hermeneutic constructivism that underlines the primacy of the interactions between person and world. From this position, it makes no sense to see perceptions as representations of a 'real world out there'. Instead they are constructions that are merely more or less viable. Using the metaphor of a key and a lock, they point out that the key doesn't tell us what the lock is like. It's merely one construction (among others) that will do the job of opening the door. Readers of this journal will recognise constructive alternativism as one species of hermeneutic constructivism.

The implications for the practice of therapy are spelled out in Chapters 3 – 6. Unlike in 'realist' cognitive therapies, there can be no formulation of what is irrational, or what constitutes a cognitive distortion. There can be no prescription about the right way of thinking or acting. The hermeneutic constructivist can only help people search for what are viable sets of constructions in their particular situations. Each of us is embedded in a particular social context that limits our range of viable constructions. There can be no God's eye view from which to declare what is right or wrong. Like the captain that manages to navigate through a dangerous channel without a chart (a metaphor the authors attribute to Watzlawick) any success cannot be said to represent *the correct* passage. The sailor does not know how near he was to disaster, or whether there was a better route. He only knows that his course was viable. Drawing mainly on Kelly, but also on others as well as their own extensive clinical experience, the authors look at the therapeutic relationship, common problem narratives, and the process of therapy itself.

David Winter says in his recommendation on the book cover: this is 'a rich source of clinical wisdom which will be of great value to both

trainees and more experienced therapists'. An example of this clinical wisdom is the compelling description of frequently occurring plots in clients' narratives. These they attribute to early interactions and patterns of attachment, contrasting those paths traced by aggressiveness with those traced by either threat or guilt. However, not all clinicians will find this an easy book to read. The chapters on the theoretical foundations of constructivism bring together a wide range of philosophy and psychology and require careful reading. But I strongly agree with David Winter's assessment. In my view this book should be essential reading for constructivist therapists.

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Trevor Butt, PhD, is Emeritus Reader in Psychology at the University of Huddersfield, UK. He trained as a clinical psychologist before working at the University of Huddersfield. He has published in the areas of personal construct theory, phenomenology, and psychotherapy, and is the joint author (with Vivien Burr) of *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology*. He also wrote *Understanding People* (2004) and *George Kelly - The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (2008).

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REFERENCE

Butt, T. (2010) Review of *Chiari, G., Nuzzo, M. L.: Constructivist psychotherapy: A narrative hermeneutic approach*. (2010). *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 7, 14-15, 2010

(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp10/butt10.pdf>)

Received: 15 January 2010 - Accepted: 16 January 2010 - Published: 11 February 2010