

Book Review

BEING HUMAN : HUMAN BEING MANIFESTO FOR A NEW PSYCHOLOGY

Rue L. Comwell

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Reviewed by

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BETTER CONSTRUCTS CAN ALWAYS EMERGE

Manifesto: a written statement declaring publicly the intentions, motives, or views of its issuer.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifesto>

Suppose we publicly declared the intention and motivation to develop a comprehensive constructivist approach to psychology. Perhaps it might end up looking something like this:

Within the continuous streaming universe of events, a constant cycle of human activity that we arbitrarily separate into segments occurs. Perception launches when a 100 msec. scan separates this unbroken (analog) input into discrete (digital) elements. A construct, the basic unit of human psychological functioning, emerges when the person identifies the perceived element by making a discrimination of it as 'the same as or similar to' or 'different from' other elements, or else irrelevant to the task at hand. This process serves survival; recognition of rhythm and repetition among events provides the ability to anticipate future events. To facilitate this function, constructs include 'anticipation tags,' elements that match with features of an anticipated event. If a construct proves useful in such anticipation it survives; if not the person abandons it. If the element matches with something similar or fa-

miliar it links to long term memory and initiates an action or thought sequence.

To facilitate survival, the scanning process biases people toward prioritizing the identification of novelty, harm, and threat. Thus, constructs develop an emotional 'valence tag,' positive or negative, based on the person's history of the consequences of relevant events. Anticipation and valence do not require conscious awareness, but some, but by no means all, constructs acquire a 'verbal tag' when an element comes to serve as a stand-in for the construct itself. This enables the person to name a construct by matching the verbal tag with its elements. When a construct within long term memory matches the input, it links to a single thought or act, generating a sequence that moves the cycle into taking action, and a process of regulating whether the sequence is on track, or making necessary corrections. A match of the anticipation tag and evidence that the anticipated event has occurred closes the loop and returns the person to scanning continuous input.

An admittedly exceedingly oversimplified summation, this description depicts some of the core psychological processes that Rue Cromwell articulates as a basis for his new theory of psychology that identifies the same/difference dis-

crimination as the fundamental explanation for all human functions. This formulation likely will seem recognizable to constructively-oriented psychologists, and we might yearn for a unified, comprehensive theoretical formulation that provides a constructivist theory that can subsume all relevant psychological phenomena. However, as Cromwell effectively argues, such an aspiration reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of human cognitive and linguistic functioning.

The process of developing constructs, including scientific theories, revolves around the same/difference distinction, and occurs within a particular context of circumstances or elements. We invent constructs and construct systems for their convenience in anticipating a particular range of events, and no construct or system can effectively anticipate all events. Cromwell astutely reminds us that constructive alternativism means that there is *always* more than one way to structure or organize sensory input. Thus he values diversity among knowledge domains rather than unity, and argues for avoiding overgeneralization and committing the reductionist error of believing that one description of an event causes another description of the event. Unrestricted diversity in describing events is necessary, he suggests, for evolution of knowledge; ways of describing events will survive pragmatically, to the extent that “they predict more things, more precisely, more often” (p.30)

In keeping with his acknowledged influence by George Kelly, Cromwell fully embodies a reflexive stance toward psychology. He effectively elaborates the understanding that a theory about human functioning must account for itself as an example of that functioning. Accordingly, his description of science follows the same guidelines as applied to human beings in general: knowledge begins by discriminating sensory input as same/difference, called constructs; dividing them into likeness, contrast, and irrelevance; using constructs for anticipation, with survival of the construct related to its effectiveness; and meaning arises as the observer communicates verbal tags to others and their responses lead to shared consensus.

A full elucidation of all of Cromwell’s thorough elaboration of a human science based on the construing process falls well beyond the

scope of this review, let alone the reviewer’s comprehension or competence. However, I will attempt to describe some additional components of the presentation that I found particularly compelling. He describes how the construct system structure evolves—how they are generated, combined, and organized—by suggesting that people break up the stream of events in which elements are embedded. They choose their own ‘cut points’ and invent how they assemble or package the stream based on prior experience and current needs. They organize these constructs into constellations and hierarchies that enable new predictions. In assessing hierarchical structure with the Repertory Grid Technique he discusses the relative merits of principle components analysis versus hierarchical classification cluster analysis. He suggests, for example, that extracting system hierarchy from a numerical matrix yields a more reliable indication of the hierarchical system structure than laddering methods, which require verbal tags for superordinate constructs. He proposes a system of modeling hierarchy that reflects how the brain stores information at a neurological level, using “decomposition of binary matrixes with the identification of overlapping sets” (p. 132).

His proposition that constructs and their organization can account for everything important about human functioning gains immensely from his discussion of the two ways that constructs relate to other constructs: symmetrically and asymmetrically. Symmetrical constructs have a bilateral relationship to each other, so that the order of pairing makes no difference. For example, ‘the rose is red’ and ‘red rose’ are clearly equivalent. Asymmetrical constructs have a unilateral relationship that implies directionality, in the sense that one construct precedes the other, providing an opportunity for planning and anticipation. For example, ‘the boy hit the ball’ is not equivalent to ‘the ball hit the boy.’ The importance of this distinction lies in the significance of asymmetric links between constructs as the basis for thought and action. Many ordinary human activities primarily use symmetric linkages, but abstract thinking and planning require asymmetric linkages among constructs. Cromwell describes the implications of these two types of linkages for many complex human functions, such as language, reasoning, and human action,

as well as their possible linkages to brain hemispheres and neurotransmitters.

Similarly to Kelly, he describes ‘self’ as a construct that discriminates between same and different, with self as the ‘same’ pole and not-self as the ‘different’ pole, observing that self constructs refer to those in which the “anticipated outcome depends on our presence or action” (p. 43). He further describes the challenge in changing self constructs in terms of their implications for the entire organization of self-related constructs. We can understand many social and affiliation processes in terms of our tendency to view ourselves positively and similar to most other people and he cites Adams-Webber’s grid work on the golden ratio to analyze the extent to which we view others in same/difference and positive/negative terms.

Throughout this thorough and ambitious book, Cromwell draws effectively on many decades of experience as a psychological scientist and clinician, and he effectively relates his construct-oriented psychology to his extensive knowledge of brain function, hemispheric localization, and neurotransmitters. He includes examples from his wide-ranging expertise and research in topics such as schizophrenia, depression, mental retardation, and PTSD, along with fascinating anecdotes from his wide-ranging professional experience. Conceptually, he connects his perspective to the work of historical figures such as Plato, Spinoza, Abelard, Kant, Mach, Helmholtz, Wundt, Bleuler, James, Planck, Einstein, and Bohr. He effectively and compellingly discusses important events in the recent history of organized psychology, the implications of the history of science, physics, and religion, and topics such as freedom and determinism, time and space, and emotion. The book represents an amazing feat of conceptual understanding and integration, within the context of absolute respect for diverse ways of making sense of sensory input and unwavering support for the value of differing knowledge domains.

This recurrent thematic emphasis on diversity of knowledge domains, and the ethos it implies, struck me as one of the most compellingly meta-theoretical constructivist contributions of the book. This perspective has significant implications for the integral view of science in particular and human functioning in general. Because dif-

ferent knowledge systems, with different ranges of convenience, may use the same or similar verbal tags we mistakenly tend to assume that the constructs with the same verbal tag mean the same thing. Furthermore, if constructs in our preferred knowledge domain effectively anticipate events in that domain we tend to generalize them to other domains, failing to acknowledge that our constructs evolved as same/difference distinctions in a particular context of elements and have no necessary validity beyond that context. We attempt to force our desire for a unified understanding by overgeneralizing from one domain to others, but a superordinate domain cannot exist because we cannot identify any single correct explanatory language for events.

Throughout the book, and in a variety of ways, Cromwell describes the problems that arise as a result of reifying constructs. We build constructs and develop consensus with others about shared constructs. We commit ourselves to these constructs as a way of making life meaningful and predictable. We then tend to believe that what we have constructed exists absolutely, as the truth. This makes it difficult to change constructs, since we have linked them with other constructs that give us our sense of reality. To change one construct may require that we reconsider everything that the construct relates to in our hierarchical system.

Other problems in human functioning occur when we attend more to verbal concepts and ‘ideas’ regarding events rather than to the actual elements and our actual experience, endowing the verbal with excessive power. In other words, once we allocate verbal tags to constructs we pay more attention to the verbal tags than to the events that we created them to anticipate. This failure to attend to the on-going anticipatory utility of our verbalized concepts leads us to continue to use obsolete ideas and beliefs that no longer effectively anticipate events.

Scientific thinking, Cromwell suggests, has proceeded on the flawed idea that we can build a model of the universe without regard to a science of how people construct models and concepts. He regards the premise of an external world that exists with absolute truth as a metaphysical assumption, not a scientific proposition, and he argues that the notion of a pre-existing reality in

science, as well as concepts like ‘mind’ have no utility. Hypothetical concepts like space, time, and self may prove useful to us in facilitating hypothesis, but otherwise have no useful purpose.

Cromwell further elucidates the idea that constructs exist solely for their purpose in anticipating events, to be discarded or abandoned when that process fails, by emphasizing disconfirmability as a key element in science and human functioning. The benefit of science in comparison to other knowledge domains derives from its assumption that we can best ask an empirical question and test a hypothesis by asking what event would disconfirm this particular formulation. Thus, doubt and disconfirmability are central to the scientific process, and we should actively seek disconfirmation of our hypotheses and constructs and take pleasure when they are invalidated. New thinking and the growth of knowledge only come about due to disconfirmation of existing ideas; scientific propositions do not remain into perpetuity.

The rich array of material in this book ranges from metatheoretical discussion regarding science and knowledge, through its elaboration of many aspects of the construing process, to methodological and clinical examples. It will, I believe, provide a fertile source for research and development of a constructivist approach to psychology. I look forward to the further elaboration of the new psychology that Cromwell has proposed and the application of the book’s many insights to the development of constructivist psychology. To help maintain proper perspective, I would like to close this review with an important reminder:

“A cardinal rule in human construct building is that there is no single correct solution. All human constructions unfor-

tunately are arbitrary. One cannot declare one construct as the right one. Some better construct can always emerge later.” (p. 158).

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