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Book Review

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT METHODOLOGY

Peter Caputi, Linda L. Viney, Beverly M. Walker, Nadia Crittenden (Eds.)

Chichester: Wiley & Blackwell, 2011, Paperback, 366 pages, £ 34.99 / € 42.00

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This edited collection sets out to describe and review a number of methods derived from Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), and the thirteen chapters that make up the book come from over twenty international clinicians and academics, including postgraduate students, with a strong representation from Australia.

The book is split into four parts, and explicitly presents a balance between quantitative and qualitative methods by devoting one part to each of these after two 'scene' setting chapters, and the final part looks at the use of PCP methods in counselling and clinical settings.

I have to say at the outset that I am rather sensitized to the issue of the need to disseminate the riches of PCP to those who may be unfamiliar with it, and this inevitably informs my review. Without a subtitle, the rather generic term 'methodology' doesn't suggest to the potential reader what they will find inside the book; the word 'methodology' is used in both clinical and research contexts, and this slight ambiguity may mean that the book is passed over by those practitioners, academics and researchers who are not already part of the PCP 'network'. In fact, the balance of the material included in the book has a strong clinical focus, and so it is likely that it will be clinicians and other practitioners who will find the greatest use for this book.

The first of the 'scene setting' chapters' begins with a brief introductory overview of the con-

struct system, to enable readers to understand what follows. They focus on reliability and validity of techniques to assist in clinical assessment – including several types of grid, laddering and the Self Characterisation Sketch – outlining the appropriate applications, as well as limitations, of each. The focus is firmly on these as quantitative methods and it would have been good to see their qualitative uses foregrounded a little more in this 'scene setting', especially since the book's structure appears to give equal status to both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The second scene-setting chapter argues for the use of qualitative methods in psychology, outlining the usual criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, and arguing that qualitative methods are consistent with PCP research.

Although the chapter will be helpful to those unfamiliar with qualitative methods, I would have liked to see it extended to include a discussion of how PCP methods may be shown to meet these criteria.

Part 2 of the book consists of four chapters devoted to selected qualitative methods; Laddering, Tschudi's ABC technique, the Self Characterisation Sketch and Experience Cycle Methodology. The first three of these illustrate each chosen method as a clinical tool through good, detailed case examples, often offering creative suggestions for novel adaptations and ways of analyz-

ing the material. The authors do also offer examples of how the methods have been or could be used in an academic or action research context, although the level of detail in these instances would not be sufficient for a novice PCP researcher to try out the methods for themselves. As a qualitative researcher I found the chapter on Experience Cycle Methodology particularly interesting, as it describes an innovative variation on the standard semi-structured interview. Exceptionally, this chapter has a research (rather than clinical) focus. However the material reported in the three illustrative case studies was not, I felt, detailed or 'rich' enough to attract the attention of qualitative researchers new to PCP.

The next four chapters are devoted to quantitative methods. The first is an introduction to grids and some variants, and methods of completing them, although this is perhaps not detailed or illustrative enough for the true novice. This is followed by a chapter on various traditional and new methods for analyzing grids, and a chapter on computer-modelling of relationships between constructs, providing visual, spatial representations. I found these chapters to require a more sophisticated understanding of grids and grid analysis than I possessed, and the grounding provided by the introductory material in earlier chapters didn't quite bridge the 'gap'. The final chapter in this part of the book discusses the use of content analysis scales for quantitative analysis of qualitative data. This is something of potentially great interest to those qualitative researchers who need to analyse large amounts of data and want a way of quantifying it whilst still retaining a focus on personal meaning. The authors provide extensive information on the reliability and validity of the scales they recommend but, frustratingly, offer little detailed guidance about how to actually perform the content analysis.

The final part consists of three chapters on methods in counselling and clinical settings: narrative, using drawings and pictures, and working with adolescents. The first broadly describes some of the dimensions of client narratives that the therapist may find it helpful to listen for, with the aim of enabling the client to re-write their 'life story' in a facilitative way. As with

previous chapters, there is little information about how to do this, although since the focus is clinical one would not expect a recipe-type approach. Narrative methods have become more popular with qualitative researchers in recent times, and it would have been good to see the authors make a connection with this. The final two chapters draw extensively on Ravenette's work, for example in the use of drawings, suggesting strategies for using such visual aids to enable clients to articulate their construing, using vivid clinical examples.

This book displays the substantial experience and expertise of those who regularly use PCP in their work, many of whom are well-established figures in the field. It illustrates the richness of PCP as a theory and as a source of innovative methods arising from this framework. However, as I continued to read it I found myself becoming increasingly concerned about the 'market' and potential readership of the book. PCP theory and methods have much to offer practitioners and researchers, and books such as this one are an opportunity to introduce this approach to a wider audience than it currently enjoys. Although those already working within a PCP framework will welcome the often creative and innovative material presented here, those practitioners and researchers unfamiliar with PCP who encounter it may find that the book does not encourage them to explore further.

One issue is that it is difficult to know how much preparatory information to include for the non-PCP audience, and I felt that the introductory material presented, while well written, was often insufficient to enable the reader to comprehend subsequent, more complex material. On the other hand, some of the chapters require such a degree of specialist knowledge that no amount of introductory material will help; the level of, and therefore the potential audience for, the different chapters varies considerably.

Although research uses are often mentioned, the focus is firmly on therapeutic contexts and the detailed examples are from clinical settings. I would have liked to see research uses of these methods more extensively explored, as the richness of the resources PCP holds for the academic researcher is generally underestimated and unacknowledged. There is usually not enough detail

about the methods to enable first-time users to try them with confidence, and so the book is unlikely to encourage researchers – or in fact practitioners – from outside of PCP to take these up.

It is difficult to know exactly who this book is for; there is a pressing need for a book which invites and encourages non-PCP specialists, both clinical and academic, to engage with the theory and its continually evolving repertoire of exciting, innovative and facilitative methods. There is much clinical and research wisdom in this book, and I would be very keen to see this reach the attention of non-PCP clinical and research communities, but I fear that it may not.

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Viv Burr is Reader in Psychology at the University of Huddersfield, UK. She has published in the areas of Social Constructionism, Personal Construct Psychology, Gender, Sexuality and the Psychology of Media and is author of 'Social Constructionism' (2003) and 'Invitation to Per-

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