

Book Review

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY IN AN ACCELERATING WORLD

Dušan Stojnov, Vladimir Džinović, Jelena Pavlović, Mary Frances (Eds.)

Belgrade: SCA/EPCA, 2010, Paperback, 230 pages, £15 / €20

Reviewed by

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As I have got older and more experienced, cynical, and realistic, I attend conferences in the hope that in a “good” conference there will be two or three presentations that I will still be thinking about in the weeks after the conference. More than that is a bonus!

The Belgrade conference, which I was at, more than met the above criteria. As Stojnov says in his preface: This book “emerges from that conference”.

I was beginning to think about writing this review when I had unsolicited assistance. I was sitting at a cafe table, and had left a copy of the book on the table beside me. An elderly (that is, older than I am!) man and his wife sat down at the same table. He asked me what the book was. I gave it to him to see for himself, anticipating the common response, (which would be to take a quick look and hand it back with an embarrassed comment that the person doesn’t know much about psychology). My anticipation was completely wrong. He began to read it, and then began to take notes! He spent at least 30 minutes speed reading various sections of the book and making detailed notes. When he gave it back he told me that he was a retired driving instructor who was about to start a 10 week course in philosophy (at the university of the third age [an educational charity]) the following day. He had found the conference book very stimulating. He was particularly pleased with how easy it was to

read, and how many ideas he had got from it that he could take to his first philosophy class.

So there you have a completely unbiased review... this is an easy to read, stimulating and thought provoking book.

The book is divided into three sections, on theory, on practice and on method.

The first section is dominated by what may be one of the last published papers of *Miller Mair*. In this he summarises his work as being “a search for understanding in which psychological and spiritual inquiry can be seen as close cousins to each other”. He finishes with the sentence, clarifying the psychology that he is reaching towards, as “a psychology of relational knowing in which WHO we are and HOW we engage in meeting may move us a step further towards gentleness and kindness along the way”. It is hard to read this chapter without experiencing a keen sense of loss, as a result of his sudden death the year after this was written.

Harry Procter illuminates the “roots of Kellian notions in Philosophy”, going back to Kant, Hegel, and following on to the American pragmatist philosophy as represented by C. S. Peirce. I especially welcome the inclusion of this chapter, the spoken version of which I attended at the conference, as only through reading the printed

text can its intellectual wealth be properly appreciated.

In the next paper, *Simone Cheli* and *Francesco Velicogna* explore the roots of constructivism and delve even deeper in history, claiming Giambattista Vico as a source of inspiration. To conclude this section there is a chapter by *Bernadette O'Sullivan*. She is drawn to the idea of "psychology as storytelling", a concept developed by Miller Mair, and discusses it with respect to the cycle of experience. She "tells the story" of her role as a supervisor of teams caring for the Irish "Traveller Community". I thought this chapter, which is a very interesting use of Kelly's cycle of experience in an applied context, sits slightly uneasily in a theoretical section: it is much more a reflection on practice (which is the title of the next section). In this chapter O'Sullivan tells us that she will "summarise ... my own participation in the Traveller community project that I have briefly described in footnote 4 above." There is no footnote 4. There is a previous summary in footnote two; I was left uncertain as to whether this was the summary being drawn on, or whether there was a missing footnote 4! The issues that she describes have a very topical resonance for the British context, where the difficulties between the traveller community and the general population have been very high profile in the recent past.

In the opening chapter of the second section *Karin Buzzegoli et al.* challenge the classification of PCP in many psychology textbooks as "just another cognitive psychology", pointing to the treatment of human feelings in a very different way from the usual academic approach.

PCP has been most elaborated in the context of psychotherapy and in the next chapter *Simona Colombari et al.* illustrate how the points made in the previous chapter (by *Buzzegoli et al.*) relate to the therapeutic situation by giving voice to clients undergoing change in therapy, with "feelings" replacing the standard term "emotions". – While many readers will be familiar with standard therapeutic situations it is hardly imaginable what *David Winter et al.* report from Sierra Leone, a country torn apart in a devastating civil war full of atrocities. Obviously, familiar ways of looking at mental illness are not applicable in a country with only one psychiatrist

and two psychiatric nurses in the mental health service, with many patients being chained as it was common in Europe 200 years ago, but the authors show how a personal construct approach may, very tentatively, open up perspectives of a change for the better. – On a very different note, *Stephen Denner-Stewart et al.* analyse the fact that in a "disease" now quite common in the "developed" world, ADHD, boys are four times as likely as girls to be affected. The chapter recounts a particularly interesting case of "ADHD" and uses drawings, within Procter's PEG grids, to look at son and father's construing of themselves and others, looking at the father's extreme authoritarian attitude and gender construing and elaborating how this construing is highly relevant to the son's problem. The section ends with a paper by *Ian Gillman-Smith* describing the difficulties a constructivist approach encounters in the British NHS which is dominated by the cognitive-behaviourist paradigm. As the domination of CBT is not unique to Britain, the situation he describes may resonate with other non British clinicians.

In the third section *Jelena Pavlović* and *Dušan Stojnov* propose, based on an analysis of the theory, that what Personal Construct Psychotherapy was for the Twentieth century, Personal Construct *Coaching* may become for the "learning society" of the Twenty-first. – *Vladimir Džinović* finds that Personal Construct *Theory* provides helpful tools applicable in the professional development of teachers. – *Harun Simsek* provides empirical evidence for the usefulness of PCP in teacher training, with teachers of English in Turkey, by exploring teachers' implicit theories of teaching, as a way of assisting them to avoid stress and burnout. – *Laura Balzani et al.* put the theory to an interesting test by applying personal construct principles to the teaching of PC therapy itself, thus demonstrating the inherent reflexivity power of the theory. – Another example of using PCP in the professional field is given by *Milica Vukelić* and *Nataša Cvijan* in the analysis of CVs submitted by job-seeking people.

In the final section, two chapters provide variations of established techniques used in PCP. – *Dušan Stojnov* and *Ljubomir Savanović* suggest an improved version of the classical "Pyramid-

ing” technique devised by Landfield, and *Miroslav Filip*, returning to Bannister’s early studies of the construction processes of schizophrenic patients, proposes a non-verbal grid procedure termed the “Semantic Selection Test”.

Like all books based on conference proceedings this volume sometimes suffers from the heterogeneity of the topics covered. In fact, not all of the chapters may appeal to all potential readers. Inevitably they vary in quality, from the “would have been published in peer reviewed journals” to “would only have been published within a book of conference proceedings”. The majority of papers are by people who have not previously published in the PCP literature. But the real value of this book is that it is a revelation of what is actually happening in the world of PCP practitioners, far removed from what makes it through the normal peer reviewed publication process.

This book is an interesting mixture of the general and the specific. Researchers (and practitioners) might get inspiration from the various examples of empirical research and professional practice, because PCP is not so much focused on certain specific areas of research but provides techniques and concepts applicable in quite different settings of research and practice.

The book demonstrates a lively use of PCP approaches and techniques, including the cycle of experience (O’Sullivan, Balzani et al.), PEG grids (Stewart, Džinović, Vukelić & Cvijan), Kelly’s corollaries (Simsek), Rep grids (Winter et al., Filip), ABC’s (Winter et al.), Constructs of transition (Buzzegoli et al.), narrative analysis (Vukelić & Cvijan), Pyramiding (Stojnov & Savanović) and loosening and tightening (Filip).

I think that anyone interested in PCP will find *at least* the three things to think about that I describe at the beginning of this review.

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