

## Trevor W. Butt

1947 – 2015

Trevor Butt, who died in April this year at the age of 67, was a major contributor to the field of Personal Construct Psychology. He was born in Hornchurch, Essex and gained his first degree in psychology from Leeds University in 1970. He then went on to complete his post graduate training in clinical psychology, also at Leeds, in 1972. Subsequently he was employed as a clinical psychologist at Lynfield Mount Hospital in Bradford. During his work there he became interested in social skills training. His theoretical approach had been behaviourist, but he became increasingly dissatisfied with this and began to move toward a more cognitive behaviourist framework as this seemed to offer more scope to work with the client's own systems of meaning-making.

It was around this time that Trevor met Don Bannister, who later became a close friend and mentor. Don had relocated from Bexley Hospital in Kent to High Royds Hospital in the Leeds-Bradford area and gathered around himself a group of young clinical psychologists, several of whom have gone on to publish in the personal construct area including Richard 'Chuck' Butler, David Green, and Trevor. There can be little doubt about the enormous influence that Don Bannister had upon Trevor's work. Although he did not remain in full time clinical practice, taking up a position as senior lecturer in psychology at the (then) Huddersfield Polytechnic, Trevor maintained his commitment to the use and development of PCP theory and methods, both in teaching and research. He attended his first PCP congress in 1985, and soon became a regular presenter at both European and international conferences.

When Viv Burr joined the department at Huddersfield in 1983, they quickly found common intellectual ground, and another life-long friendship was formed. Together they began writing from a constructive perspective. Their first joint publication (Burr & Butt, 1989) ap-

plied a constructivist approach to the phenomenon of hypnosis, which Viv had studied as a doctoral student. They subsequently presented a paper at what was to be the first EPCA conference in York in 1992. Although they collaborated on a number of publications over the years, perhaps their most significant joint output is their book *An Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology* (Burr and Butt, 1992), which aimed to bring the spirit of PCP ideas to a non-specialist audience. Trevor was largely responsible for updating and extending the book for a second edition (Butt and Burr, 2004).

The number and quality of Trevor's publications in PCP by the mid 1990s were such that he was able to gain a PhD by publication, which was examined by Phillida Salmon in 1998. Trevor's interest in research and writing, always from a constructivist standpoint, continued to flourish and he was awarded the title of Reader in 1999. He was Chair of the British Psychological Society's Psychotherapy Section in 2001, and took a lead role in organizing several PCP conferences, including the 2003 International Congress. He was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* from 2004 and a founding co-editor of the on-line journal *Personal Construct Theory & Practice* from 2004.

Trevor's frustration with prevailing models of personality contributed to a major project in the form of his book *Understanding People* (2004). Here, he aimed to challenge the agenda of mainstream psychology, which he argued was focussed on attempting to 'explain' human behaviour using the concept of causality borrowed from the natural sciences. He proposed instead that we should aim for 'understanding'. Understanding comes when we see behaviour or experience in its context, and when we gain insight into what the person sees as the reasons for (not causes of) their conduct, and is essential in the project of helping people to change. The

book reviews models of the person from all the major perspectives within psychology, such as trait theory, cognitivism and psychoanalysis, as well as the social constructionist critique of these, in Trevor's characteristic clear and accessible style. It then puts forward an alternative conception, broadly termed an 'existential phenomenological' approach, which draws on PCP in offering a more constructivist conceptualisation of the person. His commitment to constructive alternativism as a central tenet in understanding people also led Trevor into collaborations with academics outside of PCP, most notably in the area of alternative sexualities, where he co-authored publications with Jeff Hearn (University of Helsinki) and Darren Langdrige (the Open University).

As part of his desire to place PCP in its intellectual context and extend its theoretical framework, Trevor developed a strong interest in philosophy, notably phenomenology and pragmatism, becoming an active member of the BPS Section on History and Philosophy. Among his numerous publications (he published 3 books, 20 book Chapters and 30 journal articles) are papers on the relevance of both phenomenology and pragmatism to PCP. Only four years after the publication of *Understanding People* he published another major contribution, his book *George Kelly* (2008). This was written as part of Palgrave's 'Mind Shapers' series, which documents the work of key psychologists and their impact on the discipline. In keeping with Trevor's developing interest in pragmatism and his view of its relevance to PCP, the book, which is dedicated to the memory of Don Bannister, adopts a pragmatist perspective, demonstrating Trevor's familiarity with the works of Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead. Trevor's other notable contributions to the development of PCP theory include two publications (Butt, 1995; 2007) on the technique of laddering, in which he critiqued the concept of the hierarchical organisation of constructs, and a phenomenologically informed interpretation of elaborative choice (Butt, 1998).

Trevor's vision of PCP was fundamentally a social one. He maintained, as did Kelly, that our constructions are not private accomplishments; they are made in relation with others, in the con-

text of a social world. The importance of the social world for understanding people gained particular focus among social psychologists in the form of the body of theory and research that has come to be known as social constructionism. Social constructionism appears to hold several key assumptions in common with PCP. However, Trevor felt that social constructionism's exclusive focus on language ultimately constituted a form of idealism and threatened to neglect important features of personal experience, such as selfhood. This concern culminated in two publications (Butt, Burr and Bell, 1997; Butt, 1999), respectively arguing for a sense of self that is both fragmented (in line with social constructionist theory) and an important organising narrative in our subjectivity, and for a way of understanding emotions that is neither realist nor idealist.

Although his contributions to the theoretical development of PCP have been significant, Trevor was also keen to use and to promote the use of PCP methods in research, especially qualitative work. An early collaboration with Viv (Burr and Butt, 1996) was a presentation at the EPCA conference in Reading, UK, outlining what Trevor termed the 'Kellian interview'. This approach to interviewing incorporated a number of PCP ideas, doubtless influenced by Trevor's experience in clinical psychology, aimed at quickly gaining access to important features of the person's experience; for example, the use of contrasts involving real events, and contrasts between the person's anticipated experience and the actuality. A more recent collaboration disseminated the benefits of various PCP methods for qualitative research to a non-PCP audience (Burr, King and Butt, 2012). Trevor also recently collaborated on a qualitative research project exploring inter-cultural construing (Burr, Giliberto and Butt, 2014). These 'Kellian' interviews were used to explore how English and Italian people construe each other.

Trevor retired from Huddersfield in 2007 as Emeritus Reader to concentrate further on his writing and his family, including his two young granddaughters whom he adored. He continued writing and discussing his ideas with academic

friends, especially Rue Cromwell, until the week before his death.

## REFERENCES

- Burr, V. & Butt, T.W. (1989) A construct theory formulation of hypnosis. *British Journal of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis* 6, 85-90.
- Burr, V. & Butt, T. W. (1992 ) *Invitation to personal construct psychology* London: Whurr. Second Edition Butt & Burr (2004).
- Burr, V. & Butt, T.W. (1994). *The person in social constructionism*. Paper presented at the British Psychological Society Social Psychology Annual Conference, Cambridge.
- Burr, V. & Butt, T.W. (1996) *The Kellian interview*. Paper presented to the EPCA conference, Reading, UK.
- Burr, V., Gilberto, M. & Butt, T. (2014) Construing the cultural other and the self: A Personal Construct analysis of English and Italian perceptions of national character. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 39, 53-65.
- Burr, V., King, N. & Butt, T. (2012) Personal construct psychology methods for qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17 (4), 341-355.
- Butt, T. (1995) The ordinal relationship between constructs. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 8: 227-236.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10720539508410805>
- Butt, T. W. (1998) Sedimentation and elaborative choice. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 11, (4) 265-281.
- Butt, T. W. (1999) Realism, constructionism and phenomenology. In D. Nightingale & J. Crombie (Eds.), *Social constructionist psychology: a criti-*

*cal analysis of theory and practice*. (pp. 127-140). Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Butt, T. W. (2004) *Understanding people*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Butt, T. W. (2007). Personal construct theory and method: another look at laddering. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 4, 11-14.  
<http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp07/butt07.pdf>
- Butt, T. W. (2008) *George Kelly and the psychology of personal constructs* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Butt, T.W., Burr, V., & Bell, R. (1997). Fragmentation and the sense of self. *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*, 2, 12-29.

**Viv Burr, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK**

**Richard Bell, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia**

*Correspondence address:*

Viv Burr

*Email:* vburr@hud.ac.uk

## REFERENCE

- Burr., V., Bell, R. C. (2015). Trevor W. Butt - 1947-2015  
*Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 11, 34-36.

(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp15/walker-viney15.pdf>)

Received: 18 June 2015 - Accepted: 21 June 2015 –  
Published: 21 June 2015