

COMPARING PCP WITH OTHER APPROACHES: SYSTEMIC THEORY, PHENOMENOLOGY AND SEMIOTICS

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The comparison of two approaches, two positions on things, two traditions or the works of two writers has been a fundamental method for me, perhaps having its origin in my experience of growing up in a dual-heritage family. Here, I was continuously presented with German versus English ways of life, and with scientific versus religious constructions of the world. As Gregory Bateson (1979, 80) said, having two eyes, binocular vision, gives us access to a whole *extra dimension*, allowing us to see *depth*. This extra depth and breadth becomes a metaphor for what happens when we combine two different descriptions.

Any approach or position on life has its own natural *limit*, or as Kelly put it, its *range of convenience*. A particular viewpoint enables but also closes out possible views and understandings. Comparing two approaches therefore forces us to consider a wider arena of concern, the combined ranges of conveniences of each viewpoint. Becoming aware of the ‘boundary’ or *cleavage line* between the two generates a new series of constructs. Focussing on the *similarities* and *differences* between the positions coaxes out and encourages us to clarify superordinate assumptions and values of which we might otherwise have remained blind. Trying to resolve the differences between the two views poses us with the necessity of developing a new superordinate framework or synthesis which is capable of subsuming the contradictions and tensions between them, or at least to find paths which lead from one to the other. Perhaps most important of all, being exposed to different takes on life makes us realise that it is *construction* that is involved, not some kind of direct view of reality or objective truth that permits no other way of seeing things. One of the problems we are faced with in the world is that people remain within their own unquestioned beliefs, views, disciplines and areas of

specialisation. In our reading and research, it is often tempting only to read those with whom we already agree. Actually, we learn a lot from reading and studying those with whom we differ and applying our approach to the phenomena and evidence that the other highlights.

I have been involved with comparing the disciplines of psychology and sociology on the construing process and comparing Kelly with a variety of writers including Vygotsky, Bateson, Milton Erickson, Bakhtin, Peirce and others. My work has centred in general on comparing and cross-fertilising PCP with the family-systemic approaches whose developments coincided so exactly in time from the mid-twentieth century. This has been a rich combination and has led to many fruitful new therapeutic avenues. For me, the most important thing to emerge from this work is that the Construct, Kelly’s greatest contribution, is not just an entity which shapes individual anticipation and functioning, but is operative in the dynamics and patterns of interpersonal and social scenarios from dyadic relationships through to societal and international relations as indeed is already recognised in Kelly’s own thinking and writing. A construct as an entity is captured and indeed *created* in the polarisation of dialogical tensions and negotiations in small living groups through to the historical conflicts and alliances between nations, religions, belief systems and ideologies. The array of positions is also continuously operative in our own personal dialogical ‘community of selves’ and their different ‘voices’.

The most important outcome of this vision, I believe, is that PCP needs to develop an even more fundamental postulate than the current Fundamental Postulate of Kelly which focusses on the Person anticipating events. Kelly talked about how PCP has a limited shelf-life and will be ultimately replaced. But how would this look?

I think it will involve preserving the achievements of PCP within a wider framework, perhaps under a new ‘meta-fundamental’ postulate that covers the nature of persons as entities within the realms of the interpersonal, the social, the intersubjective, the dialogical and recognises what Emmanuel Levinas called the *primacy of human relating*.

Searching for a clearer understanding of all this has been driving my recent researches into the work of the originator of pragmatism, Charles Peirce, whose broadened logic of relations, semiotics and phenomenology brings forth a fascinating series of issues and dialogues with Kelly and PCP. The first two papers in the series of three that I am writing have covered the groundwork of this inquiry. The aim of Part III will concentrate on phenomenology, the person or self, dialogical process and the implications for sociology. Kelly, in spite of his rather embarrassing misunderstanding of phenomenology (or ‘phaneroscopy’ as Peirce came to call it), can be seen as a model practitioner of this approach in philosophy, as Maria Armezzani and Gabriele Chiari (2014) have so eloquently argued. It is really extraordinary the extent to which Peirce presaged so many developments in twentieth century philosophy and other disciplines. Rather like with Kelly, this work has until recently been side-lined within philosophy and psychology.

I will end with a quote from Josiah Royce, one of Peirce’s main followers, who in 1904, before the studies of intersubjectivity by Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Vygotsky and others, argued that,

Our empirical self-consciousness, from moment to moment, depends upon a series of contrast effects, whose psychological origin lies in our literal social life, and whose continuance in our present conscious life, whenever we are alone, is due to habit, to our memory of literal social relations, and to an imaginative idealisation of these relations...in origin then, the empirical ego is secondary to our social experience (Royce, 1904, my emphasis).

Royce saw us as

... individuals only in social relations with others...The social is so primordial that even our conceptions of nature, as well as of the individ-

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ual self are not initiatory but socially grounded
(cited in Sherover, 1987)

Peirce, in his semiotics, saw human relating and communicating as involving *signs*, something broader than, though of course including, all of language (Procter, in preparation). Kelly insisted that *preverbal construing* is the most primary of all. A moving example can be found in Emmanuel Levinas concerning the face-to-face encounter with another person. We know that orientation to the human face is already keenly evident in the new-born baby. For Levinas, the human face is a *primitive notion, a fundamental event*. And, for him, *ethics* is already there: “To see a face is already to hear ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (cited in Moran, 2000, 348-9).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harry Procter, PhD has developed and continues to elaborate Personal and Relational Construct Psychology which is based in PCP and more generally Systemic Constructivism. Whilst focussed on families, the approach can be applied to understanding and working with individuals, groups and organisations. He worked for thirty years as a clinical psychologist with the National Health Service, UK in the West of Eng-

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