Jörn W. Scheer, Kenneth W. Sewell (Eds.)

Creative Construing

The Psychology of Personal Constructs, as devised by the American psychologist George Kelly, stresses the importance of the meanings that individuals attach to persons and events in the world surrounding them. Originating in clinical psychology, it has increasingly attracted the interest of scholars and practitioners working in education, in organisations, and in other disciplines working with people. As there are hardly more "personal" processes than creative ones, it seems appropriate to look at the arts from a personal construct psychology perspective. This book presents for the first time analyses of creative processes, but it features also personal accounts by creative people – who write, sing, dance, act, and make music.

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Creative Construing

Personal Constructions
in the Arts

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Preface

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), developed by the North American psychologist *George Alexander Kelly*, holds that – irrespective of the existence of a 'real' world – every individual develops a personal view of the world. This is not just a personal way of 'looking at' things (and people) but implies a more general way of interpreting the world from the point of view of the individual. 'To construe' has two meanings: to build and to interpret. Thus, this verb lends itself nicely to describe the process of actively developing a personal world – by using *personal constructs*: the tools used to attach meaning to things, people and events, and, moreover, to develop individual ways of dealing with them. In the Theory of Personal Constructs Kelly provided a systematic elaboration of how this works, and how people 'in trouble' may be helped in coping with their troubles – after all, Kelly was a psychotherapist. Construing, however, occurs whenever we deal with the world...not just when we are in trouble. It implies trying out possibilities, comparing different options, choosing alternatives, revising choices. This is a process of loops or cycles, moves from 'loose' construing to 'tight' construing and back and forth until a person feels something has been 'created' that can be tested out. Creativity thus is at the core of human activity – of living.

Creativity is also considered as being at the core of artistic activity. By creating a work of art, artists *construe* – but so do the people who enjoy a piece of art, such as a painting or a performance. We all know that 'beauty lies in the eye of the beholder' (Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, *Molly Bawn*, 1887, but in similar words dating back to Shakespeare's times) – it is the beholder who 'attaches meaning' to the object of admiration. It is somehow surprising that Personal Construct Theory has not been used extensively to analyse and interpret artistic endeavours. Fay Fransella, in the comprehensive *International Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology* which appeared in 2003, mentions 'the world of music' and 'literary criticism' in the concluding section on 'new avenues to explore' – it seems there is work to be done! In fact, there are some foundations to build on. Kelly himself wrote about Hamlet in his *Magnum Opus* (Kelly, 1955); at an international conference on PCP held in 1985 several papers were presented on literature and music (Fransella & Thomas, 1988); and in 1991 a short-lived journal titled 'Constructive Criticism' presented analyses of novels and plays from a PCP perspective (Whitehead, 1991; see Appendix B). But since then not much has been published.

The idea for this book was born when a number of people involved in Personal Construct Psychology discovered more or less accidentally that they shared an interest in the arts. Some were avid readers or listeners, and some

considered themselves, cautiously, as artists: writing poems, painting, acting, making music. All of them found it worthwhile to see what a PCP perspective might have to offer when dealing with the arts. So we invited a number of colleagues to contribute to this volume.

In view of the gigantic body of literature on the arts, we refrained from engaging in a definition of 'the arts'. Instead we worked with a liberal, enumerative notion of the arts that includes visual arts, literature, music, and performing arts, (such as dancing and acting). Some of the chapters present analyses (e.g., of poems or of music), or report on the use of arts in psychotherapy or research in a more traditional way. Others are written by non-professional practitioners. This raises the interesting question of who is (or can be considered to be) an artist. Is an artist only someone who makes a living out of it, or who publishes his/her works? Certainly not; some great writers of world fame never published a single line while alive. On the other hand: hundreds of thousands of people write poems, with or without attending 'Creative Writing' workshops, that are never published (except these days maybe on the Internet), others paint 'for fun' or sing in a church choir – are they artists? They are 'amateurs' or 'dilettanti' – which in the original sense means not 'incompetent' but 'lovers'. We think they are creative in the realm of arts and therefore *are* 'artists' – and not only because we count ourselves among them.

Certainly, in editing this book, we do not intend to re-invent the wheel. But we think that as a discipline concerned with *persons* and *meanings*, PCP is particularly well prepared to deal with the *persons* who create art and enjoy art, and with what art *means* to them. This refers to the analytical tools that the theory provides, but also to the willingness and capability of its practitioners to open up – to give accounts of their personal experience in producing and enjoying art.

In keeping with the spirit of constructive alternativism, we kept editing to a minimum and especially accepted the spelling (e.g., British or American) the authors preferred. We attempted to strike a balance between the coherence of the volume as a whole and the freedoms afforded to the individual contributors.

Obviously, some areas within the arts are not covered in this book. For example, we know that there are people who paint or compose music in the PCP community, and we are sure that there are a large number of colleagues who could contribute to the development of what might tentatively be named 'a Personal Construct Theory of art'. Since a network of people interested in 'PCP and the arts' has recently been formed (http://www.arts-con.net), there is hope that this might happen one day. We would be pleased if this book would have a part in it.

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A PCT view of novel writing and reading[1]

Don Bannister

Novel reading is an exercise in continuous anticipation. As you turn the pages, on the basis of your elaborating understanding, you anticipate what will happen next. 'Happen next' refers not only to events and narrative turns of plot but also to the unfolding over time of what the people in the story are saying and experiencing, the way in which the nature of the context reveals itself, the way in which the harmonics of the novel's world are developing. You may be only intermittently and partially aware that you are predicting, and (as in daily life) it is often misprediction that brings the process into conscious focus.

If the act of novel reading is truly an act of constructive anticipation, then the reader is constantly subject to validation or invalidation or to experiencing the unfolding events as being outside the range of convenience of his or her construing. In swift sequence, a novel packages for us those confrontations which Kelly thought basic to life, in which we find our forecasts right or wrong or totally irrelevant.

Perhaps most markedly, in our novel reading, we crave validation. We have the experience of having our anticipations confirmed, of seeing the significance of what is presently portrayed, verified by outcome. Children grasp at narrative validation in a very direct way when they demand to have the same story read to them over and over again. Familiarity deepens their understanding and endows them with a sense of anticipative control. Adults often achieve the same guarantee of validation not by re-reading the same story but by reading endlessly the same kind of story. Thus much popular fiction caters to our craving for validation by working out, in varying detail, unvarying sequences, such as that of the heroic hero triumphing over the villainous villain. Detail may vary, but the essential landmarks are where we expect them to be, signposts are clear and the landscape is broadly familiar. So the most successful popular fiction is that which offers us comforting superordinate validation while, in its colourful detail, it invites us to widen (not too uncomfortably) the range of convenience of our construing. Thus the historical romance depicts for us a world in which the physical paraphernalia and customs are curious and unfamiliar, while the central psychology and metaphysic is conventional and of our time.

Nevertheless, novel reading is not a risk-free occupation. The story may, in some essential way, run contrary to our expectations and we may be in-

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validated. When this happens we may see the story as untrue, badly written and misleading. Alternatively, we may come to see it as true and revise our initial construing. This is the most powerful effect that a novel can have, in that it provides us with the kind of puzzlement and dismay which becomes insight and enables us to elaborate our understanding.

Equally, a novel can take us to the frontiers of our range of convenience, not comfortably (as on a tourist excursion to well-ordered foreign parts) but so that we find ourselves in a threatening and confusing landscape. At such times we may simply abandon the novel as a literal nonsense. Alternatively, we may find enough points of contact between worlds we have lived in and the world we are exploring in the novel, contact by analogy, metaphor, through a scatter of small but significant clues, to encourage us to complete the journey and learn.

Novel writing

Novel writing is an exercise in the controlled elaboration of an author's construct system.

Whatever the formal working system of the author, a novel stems from some personal intersect of elements and constructs which has vast implicative mass. As, for example, from childhood memory of seeing miners drinking at night time in a town square, I found myself drawn outwards into unfolding reflections and themes to do with the colliery on which my village centred, the texture of the village and its manner of life, the *mores* of childhood, unchosen life paths, and so forth (Bannister, 1979).

True, the starting point can be pre-empted into the form of a plan, and the novel be constructed to fulfil that plan rather than having its form evolve from the detail of exploration. These two processes represent varying forms of the creativity cycle, described by Kelly (1955) as a cycle which starts with loosened construction and terminates with tightened and readily validatable construction. Many novels (such as the classic 'whodunnit' mystery, which is not at all mysterious) seem written by rapidly tightening their vague and speculative origins into specific superordinate constructions from which a mass of subordinate detail can be mechanically read off. Then the cycle is worked through (in major form) once only, from loose to tight. Contrastingly, a novel can involve a perpetual cycling from loose to tight to loose construing. Thus its total shape and meaning is generated in play with its detail, rather than acting as dictator of specific content.

If a novel is thus unfolded by (for and from) the author, then just as readers may have their anticipations of what is forthcoming denied, so the author may experience invalidation. Authors may recognise that what they have written is, in an essential sense, false. That is to say, that it is untrue in the light of the construct system of the author, it is false to that total way of un-

derstanding of the world from which the particular narrative is derived. The author realises that the people on the pages could not have done or said or experienced at this point and in this context what he or she has set them down as doing, saying, experiencing. Then comes a moral choice: whether or not to consign eminently plausible pages of narrative to the wastepaper basket.

Kelly depicts the act of construing as partaking of both invention and discovery. We invent the terms in which we will view the word and thereby discover what is to be seen by taking such a view. This inextricable mixing of what we create with what we are confronted by, is most manifest in novel writing. I have grown used to working on a novel spurred on by the thought that now I shall find out what happens next. Perhaps the very length of novels emphasises this quality of 'finding through making' in our construing. We *construe* through *constructs*. Novels remind us that elaborative construing takes time, that it is a long search for what is hidden, not a simple detailing of what is manifest.

Central to elaborative construing is the movement between subordinate and superordinate construing (and back and forth again) already referred to in relation to the creativity cycle. At the heart of novel writing is exactly this deriving, working out, of the subordinate (the detail and content of the novel) from the superordinate (the theme of the novel). Equally, new aspects of the superordinate theme are generated by subordinate exploration. I had written a substantial part of the novel already referred to (Bannister, 1979) convinced that its sole theme concerned the nature of the pit village community before I realised that the specific events adumbrated an alternative autobiography — a super-ordinate which then I consciously articulated into yet further narrative. But in novels, as in life, we sometimes fail to listen to the new melodic lines implicit in the notes we are playing. Thus it is that the novel *Walden II* did little for Skinner's abstractions except to illustrate them.

Writers and readers

The relationship of novel writer to novel reader is precious but mysterious. It is intimate without being conversational. Letters are written to someone, but novels are written to whom it may concern. Kelly's Sociality Corollary asserts that it is by construing the construction processes of others that we enter into a social role with them. We might conclude that novelists are essentially construing not the construction processes of their readers but the construction processes of the characters in the novel. In the final analysis, perhaps our genius for standing in angled relationships to aspects of ourselves and others is such that the novelist is construing his or her own construction processes and representing this construction through the figures in the novel. The reader, it is, who provides sociality by construing the construction processes of the author. True, many novelists annotate their narrative, they tell the

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reader what to think, but in so doing they are essentially writing for a 'typical' reader. Thereby, they restrict themselves to some easily accessible and mundane part of their own construing, which is taken to represent the 'typical' reader.

This is not any kind of injunction to novelists to disregard their readers. It is the reading of a novel that ultimately gives it life. Rather, it is argued that novelists must respect readers and acknowledge both their right and their ability independently, to read significance *into* the novel. In chess there is the notion of playing the board rather than playing the man. It is argued that the best kind of chess is played when you do not try to capitalise on what you imagine to be the particular weaknesses or foibles of your opponent but play each move as if your opponent were a perfect chess player who will make the perfect reply. Thus it is that novels might be written. Novelists should struggle to represent their experience as truthfully and as vividly as they can, resting secure in the belief that, through our common humanity, the novel will have its significance affirmed and properly transmuted by the construct system into which it passes.

The novel, in PCT terms, is not unique. It is a special case of the anecdote, the poem, the play, the daydream. Indeed, Kelly argues it is close kin to that other great public enterprise in make-believe, Science. He set out the relationship thus:

> *But there are two differences between him [the novelist] and the scientist; he is more willing to confide his make-believe — even publish it — and he is willing to postpone the accumulation of factual evidence to support the generality of characters and themes he has narrated.*
>
> *But neither of these differences between the novelist and the scientist is very fundamental. Both men employ nonetheless typically human tactics. The fact that the scientist is ashamed to admit his fantasy probably accomplishes little more than to make it appear that he fits a popular notion of the way scientists think. And the fact that a novelist does not continue his project to the point of collecting data in support of his portrayals and generalizations suggests only that he hopes that the experiences of man will, in the end, prove him right without anyone's resorting to formal proof.*
>
> *But the brilliant scientist and the brilliant writer are pretty likely to end up saying the same thing — given, of course, a lot of time to converge upon each other. The poor scientist and the poor writer, moreover, fail in much the same way — neither of them is able to transcend the obvious. Both fail in their make-believe.* (Kelly, 1979, p. 150)