



CONSTRUCTS

The Newsletter of the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology
Founder: Fay Fransella

1984 Volume 3 Number 1

Construing and Buddhist psychology

By **Spencer A. McWilliams.**
University of Arizona.

For George Kelly, human activity is usefully understood in terms of a process called construing. To construe is to place an interpretation on an event by assigning it to a place within an organized system of bipolar or dualistic dimensions or constructs. Each of us erects a personal system of constructs based on ways of perceiving repetitive patterns or themes among a series of events which we experience as taking place along a dimension of time. Each construct represents ways in which some events are alike and thus different from other, equally relevant, events. The purpose of construing is its convenience for anticipating future events. Kelly saw the person as standing in the present, seeing it through the template of a construct system evolved from experience with past events and peering off into the future in anticipation of what may come. The construing process has practical purposes; it is a real world of real events for which the anticipations are made and the system exists for this very useful purpose.

CORNERSTONE

The cornerstone of Kelly's notion of a construct is its dichotomous nature. The universe itself is not dichotomous—it is whole, integral and undivided. Human construction, in its attempts to make the world predictable, divides it into dimensions like "for vs. against," "good vs. evil," and "up vs. down." When we do this, we then relate not to actual events but to some property which remains abstract and ultimately hypothetical. Kelly defined a psychological disorder as "any personal construction which is used repeatedly in spite of consistent invalidation" (1955, p. 831). Once we evolve a system that has utility for anticipating future events we tend to become attached to it and we resist altering it in the face of invalidating evidence.

We are readily aware of severe psychological disorders but for all of us there exists the more subtle disorder of desiring the universe to conform to our personal opinions, beliefs, and values. This desire, and the way it creates continual dissatisfaction and suffering, is the primary focus of the Buddhist approach to psychology.

DIMENSIONS

Buddhist psychology, like PCP, emphasizes that normal human understanding of the world involves the use of dualistic dimensions which, while inherently transparent provide the basis for usual thinking, feeling, and behaving. It also agrees with PCP that the universe is itself not dualistic, and that it holds no allegiance to our dualistic dimensions, but that this conventional way of relating to the world is useful for dealing with particular purposes. The major difference between the two psychologies is their emphasis on the value of this dualistic process. The PCP approach tends to focus on the utility of dualistic construing and has developed very useful methods for elaborating how the construct system is organized and assisting the person to evolve a more effective and useful construct system. Buddhist psychology, in contrast, has focused on the lack of substantiality of the dualistic system and has developed a repertoire of methods for assisting the person to see through the "illusion" of the conceptual world and to come to a direct experience of the basic unity of all things.

**SIXTH
INTERNATIONAL
CONGRESS**
— see page 6. —

McWilliams on the Buddhist perspective

From the Buddhist perspective, a fundamental concern about dualistic construing is that it creates divisions, separations, and boundaries in what we know to be a unified, holistic, inter-connected universe. Through the construing process we essentially create and inhabit a delusional world in which things are separate and distinct. Reality itself is devoid of distinct "things," as all things are manifestations of the same reality. Since the real world has no opposites it can't be grasped in terms of dichotomous thoughts. As a result, all constructions of reality are essentially empty and devoid of substance.

To the extent that we attend to conventional, dichotomous, ideas *about* the universe, we are taken away from the direct, immediate experience *of* the universe. We draw a boundary between ourselves and the rest of the universe, setting up a split which is not inherent in reality. As a result, our dualistic construct system becomes inherently self-centered. We identify our "self" with our constructs and, since we use our constructs to maintain our construction of our "self," we have a great investment in their survival, even in the face of evidence which contradicts their predictions. Such evidence is not hard to come by since the world exists independently of our construction of it and rarely manages to satisfy our particular self-directed anticipations for very long. Thus, rather than directly experiencing the world, we divide it into those events which support our notion of what is "good" for us or "validating" for our system, and those events which are "bad" for us because they "invalidate" our system. We cling to what we have that is "good" and grasp for more, and we avoid and try to resist what is "bad" for us, responding with anger or hostility to the failure of the universe to conform to our particular construction. Throughout both of these processes we remain divided from the universe and ignorant of the essential unity of all things.

By accepting dichotomies as real, we direct out energy toward reifying our constructs and perceiving the mental processes which evolve as real and important, and our lives become directed by these thoughts, and their accompanying emotions. Buddhist psychology suggests that it is possible to transcend the delusion of our self-invented dualistic world and, in seeing the transparency of our construct system, experience a greater sense of unity with all things. Such an experience could derive from a direct awareness of the personally constructed, and hence insubstantial, nature of dichotomous construing. It does not mean abandonment of the construct system, foregoing a way to anticipate events, for constructs can be recognized as useful for practical thinking.

It would, however, involve becoming aware of the difference between the constructs and the events themselves, and the personal, self-centered way in which constructs are used. Such awareness could help to free us from our self-imposed limitations.

There are a number of methods within Personal Construct Psychology which are relevant to enhancing this process. Construct elicitation, laddering of superordinate constructs, and repertory grid analysis methods can all be directed toward facilitating greater awareness of the way in which the world of experience becomes divided into parts and how personal values and emotions affect what we experience. Philip Boxer's work on reflexive learning represents an example of how repertory grid methods can be used to assist the person in becoming aware of the *process* of construing.

Traditional Buddhist approaches have been based on meditation practices. Insight meditation consists of practices oriented towards awareness of present sensory and mental events, and the relation between them and the construing process, following awareness from moment-to-moment as sensations arise, become construed, lead to discrimination at a pole of a dimension, and ultimately to judgment at superordinate levels, accompanied by conditions chains of association. In Concentration meditation the person maintains open concentration or awareness by focussing on the breath, sensations, or a rationally meaningless question (e.g., "Who am I?"). As attention wanders to thought, the thoughts are allowed to arise and pass without attachment or judgement, and attention is returned to the breath, etc. Through this process, the insubstantial and ever-changing nature of thought is experienced and constructs can be seen as "just constructs" rather than something real and important.

Such practices help develop greater awareness of the way in which dichotomous construing divides and separates the seamless universe, removing our experience from our unity with the whole. Dichotomous constructs may still be used for practical thinking, but with the awareness that there is a difference between the divided world they represent and the unified world which coexists with them. Through such a process we may be able to bring our awareness into greater correspondence with the holistic universe and reduce our sense of separateness from it. A more expanded awareness, independent of preconstrued expectations, can leave us open to new ways of construing new events, and can serve to reduce our dissatisfaction with our lives.

COMING EVENTS

The dates for courses, workshops and other events in 1985 have now been finalized and are listed below.

The first Intensive Basic course in August 1984 was well attended and popular and the second one is scheduled for April 1985. It has been brought forward in 1985 in order to allow space for the major event this year which is the Sixth International Congress in Personal Construct Psychology to take place in Cambridge from 5-9 August 1985. Details of the Congress are to be found on page 6.

Another development, arising from the interest shown by the participants in the first Intensive Basic General Course, is the founding of the Pyramid Press, a network for students to hold meetings, discussions or social events at the Centre or elsewhere.

We hope that they, and other members of the Centre, will be able to take the opportunity to run Saturday workshops at the Centre. It is proposed that students who would like to organize such a workshop may book a room at a very reasonable fee for a Saturday during 1984-85 and those interested in the theme or discussion may then attend quite cheaply. Our official one-day workshops have been reduced to one only, unless a group of eight people ask the Centre to organize a course on their behalf, when we shall be happy to respond.