

Emotional Expression and Construct Transition

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A criticism often leveled at Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) is that it is primarily a "cognitive" theory, although Kelly (1955) clearly described construing as a holistic human process which encompasses events typically construed as "emotion" and "behavior" as well as "cognition." Many PCP psychologists have gone to great lengths to refute this criticism, and recent essays by Bannister (1977) and McCoy (1977) have effectively elaborated the emotional implications of PCP. However, since the theory is communicated by use of written or verbalized "thinking," and the bulk of the PCP literature focuses on the verbal analysis of the construct system, the misunderstanding may continue. Acceptance of PCP as a holistic theory may require continued elaboration of its emotional and behavioral aspects. The present paper approaches further elaboration of the emotional aspects of PCP by first discussing the emotional commitment inherent in the construal process and then relating the inferred processes of construal transition to outward expression of emotion.

Man-The-Scientist: A Fresh Look

It might be useful to begin this discussion with a return to PCP's original metaphor, man-the-scientist, for a fresh look. The generally held view of science is that it is a dispassionate process consisting entirely of "cognitive" activity. Bannister (1977) has discussed how logical processes can be seen to have a strongly passionate component, and he describes emotion as an integral part of human exploration and understanding, in which we metaphorically allow ourselves to be overcome by the experience of a feeling.

Perhaps a look at what a philosophy of science might say about the human processes involved in actual work of the scientist would support what we already know intuitively: scientists have an emotional investment in the outcome of their experiments. The undertaking of a scientific experiment represents an emotional commitment of the highest order, a commitment to a notion of "how it might be." British philosopher of science Michael Polanyi perhaps expressed this understanding best in elaborating his construct of focal vs. subsidiary awareness. He distinguished between what we can specify about what we know and what we know but cannot specify because it represents the background from which what is specified is derived. Polanyi eloquently portrayed the passion involved in scientific work when he described the process of induction as used in solving a problem (1969, pp. 131-2).

Agog with his problem, the (scientist) speculates on the possibilities offered by the field of experience, and by his sustained efforts to solve his problem brings about the emergence of its solution. . . . An inductive problem is an intimation of coherence among hitherto uncomprehended particulars, and the problem is genuine to the extent to which this intimation is true. Such a surmise vaguely anticipates the evidence which will support it and guides the mind engrossed by it to the discovery of this evidence. . . . To see a problem is to see something hidden that may yet be accessible. The knowledge of a problem is, therefore, like the knowing of unspecifiabiles, a knowing of more than you can tell. But our awareness of unspecifiable things, whether of particulars or of the coherence of particulars, is intensified here to an *exciting intimation* of their hidden presence. It is an *engrossing* possession of incipient knowledge which *passionately strives* to validate itself (emphasis added).

Thus we see that even for The Scientist construing is a passionate undertaking. Perhaps we can say more about how emotional processes can be seen within the work of the scientist, and from this it is only a short step to extend our metaphor back to an understanding of human processes in general.

When we plan an experiment we review the current state of our construal of a particular domain of events, ask experimental questions, and derive testable hypotheses. These activities are primarily seen as *thinking*. When we conduct the actual experiment we primarily notice our *behavior*. We "run subjects," collect and analyze data, etc. The next step, the Discussion section in formal Science, is to place an interpretation on the outcome of our hypothesis testing, and its implications for the status of our construct system. This may be seen as primarily an *emotional* experience. The experiment, if it was worth doing in the first place, had the promise of altering our construal of something. The alteration might take the form of validation, a further definition and refinement of our existing construal. It could also represent a failure of the prior construal to correctly anticipate, an invalidation. In either case the construct system will have to be changed. It will undergo a period of transition.

Within Personal Construct Psychology, emotion is seen as a person's awareness of the process of construction transition. Thus, this phase of construing may be seen as an essentially passionate, emotional process. The intensity of the emotion experienced will be in proportion to the extent of the construct system affected by the outcome. We "feel" more when major, comprehensive, or core constructs are at stake than when the event influences minor, incidental, or peripheral constructs. In each case, the scientist must interpret the data in terms of the original construal and then alter the original construal to bring it more fully in conformity with the construed outcome. This means *changing* the construct, and if the change is to lead to more effective experimentation in the future, it means being *aware* of these changes. Awareness of construal change is the PCP definition of emotion, and if genuine experiencing of events is taking place it therefore must be accompanied by emotion. Emotion, as well as behavior and cognition, is thus clearly an integral part of the construing process of the scientist, and, applying the metaphor, to people in general.

Emotion in Personal Construct Psychology

Having considered the proposition that emotion is an integral part of the construing process, let us now turn to how emotion has been construed in PCP terms. McCoy's (1977) excellent essay reconstruing emotion elaborately reviewed the PCP approach to emotion and we will only briefly summarize the major points here. Kelly (1955) first described a PCP view of emotion, referring to it as a person's awareness that the events being construed have important implications for the state of his/ her construct system. They represent the person's awareness that whatever is going on, the fate of some portion of the construct system hangs in the balance. Kelly made two very important points about this view of emotion. First, it is seen as a way of construing a part of a holistic process, not as a motivating force with its own power. Second, Kelly was carefully propositional about his definition of emotion, allowing the events to be simultaneously construed in different ways. Thus, fear could involve awareness of terror, trembling, and cold sweat, as well as imminent incidental change in one's core structure. Kelly originally described four experiences involving a person's awareness of construct transition (guilt, fear, threat, anxiety) and two emotional behaviors (aggression and hostility), and he elaborated on them in various ways in later writings (Maher, 1969). McCoy (1977) reviewed the extant literature on emotion, and then expanded the list of constructs of emotional events to encompass the consensually accepted range of emotions. In doing so, she followed Kelly's basic format, by defining emotion in terms of the person's awareness of validation vs. invalidation, whether the incidental or core structure was involved, etc. McCoy included definitions for experiences such as doubt, love, happiness, sadness, self-confidence, surprise, and others, providing us with a thorough system for construing the broad range of human emotional experiences within the PCP framework.

Emotional Expression

Thus we have a system for construing a person's emotional experiences, but the relationship between this construal and direct, outwardly observable emotional phenomena has at most only been implied. There are several compelling arguments in favor of focusing on direct, expressed emotion. First, people typically construe problems with human processes as emotional problems. We tend to evaluate the state of the effectiveness of our human processes in terms of our feelings about things; we feel good, happy, contented, or bad, sad, fearful. Moreover, when people talk about emotions, or feelings, they typically refer not only to a person's awareness of an affective state, but also to certain outward manifestations: crying, laughter, trembling, excited talking, etc. For a PCP construal of emotion to have maximal credibility, it should be able to subsume these processes. Second, emotional expression, traditionally called catharsis, is an important component of much psychotherapy (Nichols & Zax, 1977; Scheff, 1979). Since psychotherapy is seen as the focus of convenience of PCP, its view of emotion should encompass the relationship between their direct expression and change in construal through psychotherapy.

Stated most simply, the view proposed here is that when a person is directly expressing an emotional process it might be useful to assume that the person is also aware, or potentially aware at some level, of a concomitant transition in his/her construct system. Before elaborating on this view, it might be useful to examine what has been previously said, both within and without PCP, about the expression of emotion and changes in construing.

Catharsis

The notion of overt emotional expression, particularly in relation to psychotherapeutic change, has traditionally been called catharsis. Although evidence suggesting the curative powers emotional expression can be traced far back in human history, Freud and Breuer were

the first "modern psychotherapists" to describe the potential therapeutic benefits of direct expression of emotion connected with a traumatic event (Fancher, 1973). Unfortunately, the connection of the cathartic method with hypnosis and suggestion, as well as Freud's "hydraulic" model of psychic energy, led to rather negative views of the approach. For example, Kelly (1955, P. 875) described "the notion(s) of catharsis . . . as providing drainage for hostility," suggesting that catharsis was seen as a way to dispose of a noxious substance rather than a process involved in reconstruing. In general, Kelly's view of direct emotional expression in therapy followed this rather pessimistic appraisal. In discussing disorders of transition, he commented that "weeping is best viewed as a device for avoiding anxiety (1955, P. 896)" and he suggested that crying represents a childhood construction of a more dependent role. But it is also possible for these forms of emotional expression to represent the client's awareness of a reconstrual process.

Contemporary literature on catharsis presents a quite different view of the nature of emotional expression and therapeutic change. The current emphasis is on the relation between emotion and thought. In a major recent volume reviewing cathartic methods, Nichols and Zax (1977) suggested that feelings are a component of memories, which also have a cognitive component; thoughts about an event are related to feelings. Thus, when past experiences are recalled, expressing feelings associated with the event is as much a part of the process of "understanding" the event as is the recollection of thoughts.

In general, the modern view is that catharsis, rather than serving a ventilating or draining function, facilitates a more complete reconstrual of an event by encouraging the client to make the connection between thoughts, behavior, and feelings in a holistic fashion.

Let us exemplify this general model with a brief review of a representative cathartic approach. The theory of Re-evaluation Counseling (RC; Jackins, 1965; Somers, 1972) represents a therapeutic model based almost exclusively on emotional expression, yet this

emotional "discharge" is seen as an outward manifestation of an inferred process of "re-evaluation" in which past events are reviewed and re-experienced. Within the RC model, emotional expression in the presence of support and acceptance from another person is seen as a natural human process which follows important stressful experiences. The theory proposes that information received from the environment in times of stress is not fully integrated into the person's system for symbolizing experience. Instead this information remains rigidly interconnected such that exposure to events similar to past stressful experience may lead to irrational, rigid, "patterned" responses. When the person reviews the experience, and "discharges" the emotions which arise during the process, it is proposed that the memory of the event undergoes a process of re-evaluation, where the various bits of information are examined and appropriately integrated into the larger system, leaving the person free to respond flexibly and rationally in the future.

This understanding of emotion is very similar to the PCP model: emotions are a process which accompanies change and elaboration of the system through which the person symbolizes experiences and chooses responses to events. Cathartic approaches differ from PCP primarily in their emphasis on eliciting and sustaining the direct expression of emotion as an integral part of therapeutic reconstruction, whereas PCP therapy has traditionally focused on discussing, construing, and planning new behavioral experiments. We are suggesting that the PCP approach can be usefully extended to incorporate a notion of direct emotional expression as representing a signal, to the person or therapist, that construct transition is occurring, and that the encouragement of such emotional expression might, in appropriate instances, facilitate desirable therapeutic change.

Implication for PCP Psychotherapy

Encouragement of directly expressed emotion, when it evolves in the context of attending to construal, may provide a means to assist the client in focusing on the fate of the construct

system whose range encompasses the events being considered. In fact, *focusing* is a term proposed by Gendlin (1974; Gendlin et al., 1968), working within the client-centered framework, to refer to the extent to which the client *directly experiences* feelings while in the therapy session as opposed to *talking about* emotional experiences. By encouraging this focus, the client is brought to direct awareness of the relations between his thoughts, behavior, and experiences. The Experience Corollary suggests that "a person's construction system varies as he successively construes the replication of events (Kelly, 1955, p. 72). " Since the purpose of psychotherapy is to facilitate variation in the person's construct system, and complete construal involves the emotional aspects of reconstrual, encouraging the client to attend to this process, and to admit the emotional components to awareness, may lead to more complete reconstrual than when the emotional aspect is ignored or discouraged.

Additionally, continued experimental elaboration of our understanding of the therapeutic process may be enhanced by having an objective, readily observable indicator of the presence of construct transition in the therapy setting. It has been demonstrated (Nichols, 1974) that reliable, objective, systematic recording of emotional expression during therapy sessions is possible, and there is evidence to suggest that it may be correlated with the degree of therapeutic change. Furthermore, experience with Re-evaluation Counseling has suggested that certain emotional experiences may be related to specific modes of emotional expression. Thus, fear may be accompanied by trembling and perspiration, sadness by crying, embarrassment by laughter. A number of experimental questions relating different types of emotional expression construct change present themselves.

Implications for Obsessive Neurosis

If we propose that emotion is awareness of construct transition and that this process may be manifested by direct emotional expression, what can we say about situations in which a lack of emotional expression is noticeable? One particular clinical syndrome which fits this criterion

is what is typically referred to as the obsessive-compulsive neurosis. Characteristic of this syndrome are processes labeled "isolation of affect" and "emotional distancing." It might be useful to approach this phenomenon in terms of construction processes to see if the lack of emotional expression can be related to a failure to admit construct transition to awareness.

In order for the outcome of a prediction to be validated or invalidated, it must be construed at a different level than the original prediction. Kelly (1955) used the example of a horse race, where the judge's decision is accepted as a more accurate determination of who won than the original predictor variable, the color of the horse. In other words, the prediction is that if certain qualities are present, certain *other* outcomes will result. In obsessive thinking, however, this function is often lost. Rather than construing the actual outcome of the prediction, the obsessive often ruminates over the original predictor and, in essence, validates the construct internally without reference to external events.

David Shapiro (1965) provides an excellent example of this obsessive phenomenon. Rather than asking, of his construal "Is it true?" the question is avoided in favor of asking whether the situation "fits" the prior construal. "One compulsive patient, for example, said of the girl he planned to marry, 'I must be in love with her -- she has all the qualities I want in a wife (Shapiro, 1965, p. 50).'" Thus, the preoccupation with internal reification of the original construal led to a failure to attend to the originally predicted outcome -- feelings of love. By failing to construe the outcome at a different level than the prediction, the integrity of the system is maintained, but only by validating it in its own terms and not through external testing. Since the person does not construe events in terms of validation or invalidation of predictions, he/she does not experience construct transition (other, perhaps, than anxiety which can be avoided by compulsive acts), and thus does not experience or express feelings.

The essence of full construing is the person's behavioral commitment to a notion of the way things are. Angyal (1965) described the obsessive-compulsive style as a "pattern of non-

commitment." Due to intense confusion over whether the universe is essentially hostile or friendly, the person "slot rattles" and expresses doubt and indecision which is manifested in a failure to commit him/herself to a specific interpretation or a prediction. Without commitment, subsequent events are not fully construed and transition in the system is not experienced. "The noncommittal person is unable to be wholeheartedly involved in anything (Angyal, 1965, p. 165)."

Thus the person does not express feelings because he/she has failed to construe, or has only partially construed, events having significant ramifications for his/her interpretive structure. If the person is to revise these constructs to bring them more in conformity with construed outcomes, it will be necessary for him/her to become aware of the impact of these events on the construct system, and collateral expression of emotion may be seen as evidence of this awareness.

It is not necessary, in such an analysis, to suggest that the feelings were "repressed" or "blocked" or that the person is not "in touch with his/ her real feelings" as if they had been lying dormant. Instead we can say that the events were not felt because they were not construed as having a significant impact on the construct system. Once the person construes the events and their significance to the construct system, the feelings may then be felt and expressed. The person may then understand past experiences in a new way and may evaluate them differently, in a more complete and integrated fashion. A ruminative choice has been replaced by an experiential choice, which leads to awareness of changing constructions and the experience of new, hitherto unexperienced, feelings.

The Passion of Logic

Let us end this discussion with a return to our original consideration of man-the-construing-scientist. As it is often interpreted, construing may be seen as a logical process. But logical processes may also be seen as essentially passionate undertakings. By placing

an event within an interpretive structure a personal commitment is made to a particular version of the way things are. When subsequent events are construed as confirming or denying the validity of that interpretation the person is changed. The extent of the change is proportional to the amount of the person's interpretive structure which has been committed to the particular construal. To the extent that a major portion of the structure has been committed to a particular construal, the personal change is significant. And to the extent that the person is aware of this significant, major, personal change, he will experience and probably express directly, deeply felt and compelling emotion.

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