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“There is nothing as practical as a good theory”: Theorising relationality in clinical practice

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Harold Procter & David Winter, *Personal and relational construct psychotherapy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 387 pp. ISBN 9783030521769 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Raya Jones , Cardiff University

Kurt Lewin’s maxim, quoted in my title, applies also to this welcome contribution to psychotherapy. The book offers a state-of-the-art compendium of therapeutic techniques developed by George Kelly and his followers since Kelly launched personal constructs psychology (PCP) in 1955, and provokes us to consider Kelly’s work afresh, if not for the first time. Going beyond Kelly, the authors outline a conceptual framework—personal and relational construct psychotherapy (PRCP)—based on Procter’s concept of relational constructs.

Influenced by family systems therapy and the insight that group dynamics differ from dyadic relationships, Procter has been developing his Relationality Corollary since the 1970s. Whereas Kelly prompts therapists to elicit clients’ construal of self in relation to others, PRCP adds the relevance of clients’ construal of relationship units. The case of a middle-aged woman, Carol, illustrates. Following Kelly, a repgrid procedure charted her construal of similarities and differences between herself and her younger brother; for example, she takes care of their elderly parents, he doesn’t. Procter’s I-Me-You-Us grid tapped her construal of a problematic family relationship. Carol regarded herself and her brother as being equally responsible for their parents, and this construal underpinned the tensions with her brother. “In spite of being a dyadic situation, it is a triadic problematic situation” (p. 119).

The scope of PCP and its relational extension depends partly on whether one limits psychology to the scientific quest for causal explanations or opens it up to an art of understanding. Procter and Winter remind us that PCP is primarily “a *method* of accessing clients’ construing rather than . . . [a] set of explanations about problem formation” (p. 152). As Butt (2008) averred, PCP is a powerful tool for understanding human action but its typical depiction in introductory texts is “frozen in the past because of the natural sciences framework in which contemporary personality theory is set” (p. 51). Proponents of the postmodern turn that emerged in the 1980s eschewed the natural scientific model, and produced a plethora of psychologies invested in understanding human action. Historically and conceptually, Procter’s Relationality Corollary could be located

slightly ahead of that movement. For some psychologists, however, the turn to discourse meant moving away from their earlier interest in PCP. For instance, Salmon opined that a simple alternative to the repgrid would be “truer to genuine conversation . . . not force the person into making judgements which feel artificial, which do violence to natural ways of thinking” (1988, as quoted in Jones, 1997, p. 461). Armed with Procter and Winter’s book, we may challenge that opinion: the authors provide clinical vignettes that inter alia evince how PCP techniques, by virtue of breaking away from habitual ways of conversing, can tease out idiosyncratic ways of thinking that “feel” as natural to the person but might elude expression in an ordinary conversation. However, this reflection is mine. Somewhat disappointedly from the standpoint of a theoretical psychologist, the book understates its own potential as a critique of postmodernism.

Kelly’s constructivism (or constructive alternativism as he called it) was novel when he introduced it against the Freudian ethos of 1950s American psychotherapy. Since then, numerous other frameworks emerged under the rubric of constructivism or constructionism. According to Procter and Winter, PRCP incorporates conceptual elements across a spectrum mapped from radical constructivism at the biological end to social constructionism at the sociological end. Psychologists satisfied with one of these variants, however, might not see the necessity for such an integration. Indeed, selecting elements to “integrate” might forfeit core elements of alternative perspectives. For instance, while the authors mention in passing that their emphasis on the centrality of moral stances in human relatedness accords with Harré’s concept of positioning, they do not mention the profound incommensurability of Kellyian constructivism and the precepts of Harré’s social constructionism (see Jones, 1997).

The book’s penultimate chapter provides a crib sheet of contrasts and similarities between PCP and psychoanalytical, cognitive–behavioural, humanistic, and systemic therapies. Noting the integrative potential of similarities between PRCP and some post-modern variants of these frameworks, the authors assert that nevertheless, PRCP “remains a distinctive therapeutic approach” (p. 267). It is set apart also from narrative-oriented revisions of PCP (reviewed in the book) and from Dialogical Self Theory (DST), which was first developed by psychotherapists Hermans and associates in the 1990s, and is not mentioned in the book. This deserves a pause. Procter and Winter’s statement that PRCP broadens Kelly’s notion of a bipolar construct into “an enormously pervasive and versatile dialogical entity” whose poles “are the *positions* that people take up and enact in their dialogue” (p. 74) bears a striking resemblance to DST’s conceptual definition of *I-positions*. The omission of the latter is a missed opportunity to clarify the distinctiveness of PRCP.

In conclusion, the book achieves its objectives extremely well. It is full to the brim with practical resources for therapists, and brings the richness and sophistication of Kelly’s legacy also to those unfamiliar with it. Nevertheless, like the proverbial glass that is simultaneously half full and half empty, the potential for situating PRCP in non-clinical contexts is underexplored. This should not be taken negatively (adding the kind of content I find missing might require expanding the book to two volumes). Rather, favourably viewed, the book’s “empty” aspect may trigger scholarly dialogues with its contents, which would examine its themes against a wider backdrop of historical and conceptual issues.

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